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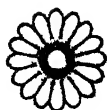
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JUDGMENT IN SUSPENSE



GERALD BULLETT

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FELIX qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas
atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum
subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis avari.
Fortunatus et ille, deos qui novit agrestis,
Panaque Silvanumque senem Nymphasque sorores.



Happy he who is able to search out
The causes of things, and under his feet has cast
All anxious fear, inexorable doom,
And the harsh roar of hungry Acheron.
Happy he, too, who knows the woodland gods,
Pan and old Silvanus, and the sister Nymphs.

VIRGIL

I

IN the middle of Heywood's quiet Sunday afternoon a high wind sprang out of the west. It teased the wide waters of the Severn, set curtsying the grasses in the green valley, and sweeping across the Cotswold hills burst into the headmaster's garden at Conington Manor, where—as though it had been a ghost at his elbow—it snatched from his very fingers the page he was idly reading. Looking up with an air of mild astonishment, he saw the hedge quivering and the cedars with helpless hopeless dignity tossing their feathery arms. He was a long man, with a round reddish face and a thatch of stiff grey hair. Because he had been abstracted, lost in thought, the invasion took him completely by surprise. A moment ago he had been lapped in the still serenity and temperate warmth of this early spring day; now all nature was in a state of commotion. The reflection drifted across his mind, coming between himself and the page he went back to, that his solitary hour was broken to pieces by this gust; but he did not know that the moment of the wind's irruption marked the beginning of another and a more complicated disturbance.

A voice called him. The call came from the direction of the house. It began with a 'Hi!' and ended with a 'Cooee!' and he recognized it at once for what it was: a characteristic greeting from a member of his Junior School.

He put a hand on the grass, to lean on, and peered round from his deck-chair.

'Hullo! Want *me*?'

A lean little girl came leaping across the lawn: large eyes, conspicuous elbows, fair hair done in two plaits. She came to a standstill some yards away and stood poised, as though for flight.

'Somebody wants you. She's at the front door. At least she was. I've sat her in the hall.'

'Who is it, Rosalind, do you know?'

Rosalind Hart stared at the headmaster with serene, uninterested detachment.

'I asked her that. Mrs Shenley her name is, or something.'

'That was very sensible of you,' said Heywood. 'And what were you doing there?'

'Just standing,' said Rosalind. She offered no further explanation. Nor was any required of her. 'She's been knocking and ringing a long time. So I walked in to tell you. Is everybody out?'

'They've all gone to Tewkesbury,' Heywood explained. 'In David's car to see the—whatever it is they're going to see.'

'Millicent as well?' asked Rosalind.

'No. Millicent has gone to see her poor mother, she says. It's her afternoon off, you know.' Heywood got out of his chair and stood reflecting, a gaunt hand stroking his chin. He half wanted to ask what Mrs Shenley looked like, but dismissed the idea as indiscreet: there were still some things, if not many, that he was unwilling to discuss with nine-year-olds. 'Where's Stuart Adscombe, do you know?'

'Stuart? He's gone to Tewkesbury too.'

'Good. I thought so. And they'll be late back,' said Heywood, reassuring himself. 'Well!'—he grinned down at the child—'I'd better go and see what she wants, your Mrs Shenley.'

He sauntered into the house and found Olive Shenley where Rosalind had thoughtfully settled her: in the chimney-corner of the large, half-panelled hall. A log-fire burned on the wide hearth, for this April day was warm only in the sunshine.

'I'm afraid I've kept you waiting, Mrs Shenley?'

His voice was bland and schoolmasterly: this was the note he wished to strike.

‘Mr Heywood?’

Olive Shenley was small and dark and very comely with her rose-petal complexion and softly rounded contours. The glance of her warm eyes—like that of a shy, confiding animal, it seemed to Heywood—established at once an illusion of intimacy. He became conscious of a flicker of chivalrous feeling within him, and was amused, recognizing the symptoms. Wise, mature, kindly, protective: a man must be wary of any young woman who inspires this flattering conception of oneself at the first moment of meeting, especially a man who happens to be headmaster of a co-educational school. So thought Heywood, in the wisdom of his forty-seven years. He was forearmed: careless and confident. He smiled a welcome at his visitor, but checked the smile with a look of polite distress.

‘I won’t say I’m sorry you’ve come,’ he said, with vaguely gallant implications which were more than he intended and of which he disapproved. ‘But I’m afraid you’ve made a fruitless journey.’

‘You surely don’t mean that Stuart——?’

‘Stuart is not here, Mrs Shenley.’

‘Not here! But I’ve come to see him. I told you on the telephone.’

‘Your seeing him to-day,’ said Heywood, ‘is out of the question. He’s not here.’

‘But, Mr Heywood, this is *unspeakable*. I don’t understand. He’s my child. What have you done with him? He was here yesterday. At least you let me think so. I said I was coming to see him. That was the whole point of my ringing you up. Why else should I have done so? And now you tell me he’s not here. How can you be so unkind?’

The excited flow of her sentences, reinforcing the effect of her beauty, made Mrs Shenley seem younger than it was

reasonable to suppose her. That she should have a child of nine took some believing, though the fact was not in doubt; and her being the boy's mother gave her more than a right to be heard and argued with. Heywood had small relish for the job, though he did see that so long as he could keep his sympathy in check, which he was confident of doing, it might present unusual points of interest to one who liked to believe himself a detached, casual, but not incurious observer of human nature.

'Unkind?' He spoke soothingly. 'I hope I'm not that, Mrs Shenley. But I did warn you, as you'll agree. I said on the telephone that I couldn't promise he'd be here to see you, and I asked, if you remember, for a number where I could ring you back later.'

'Yes, but——'

'But you were in a great hurry, it seemed. And you rather abruptly ended the conversation by announcing that you'd be here this afternoon.'

She met his mildly ironical glance with unfaltering candour.

'I want to see Stuart,' she said simply. 'I don't want to be confused with a lot of argument about what I said on the telephone or what you said on the telephone or what anybody said on the telephone. The telephone's got nothing to do with it. I'm Stuart's mother and I've come to see him.'

Heywood shrugged his shoulders. There was impatience as well as embarrassment in his smile.

'And you just stand there and smile!' said Olive Shenley piteously.

'No! Please!' he quickly interposed. 'Don't cry! Because even if you do I can't produce him for you out of my hat. For one thing, I hardly ever wear a hat.'

He hardly expected her to smile at this trivial pleasantry. Nor did she. But it was the kind of thing he would say to a child who threatened him with tears, and the trick nearly always worked. With a wad of handkerchief the size of a

postage-stamp Olive Shenley dabbed at her eyes. But she made no further demonstration, and he judged that she knew better than to cry unless she must.

When she spoke again there was a new dignity in her voice, a quieter indignation. The change was sudden and disconcerting: it made a woman of her, and without forfeit of her young and powerful charm.

‘Very well, Mr Heywood, I won’t cry. I won’t put you to the inconvenience of having to sympathize with me. I’m sure you much prefer to stand aloof, in your righteousness.’

‘My righteousness!’ Heywood echoed. ‘But what in the world are you driving at?’

The question was disingenuous: he saw her drift well enough. But he felt it was impossible to confess to his knowledge of the situation until she gave him a clearer lead.

She met the evasion with a direct challenge.

‘If you don’t know what I mean, why did you send Stuart away from the school when you knew I was coming?’

The directness pleased him. He began to like the young woman better.

‘The truth is, I didn’t. He went off without any prompting from me. But that’s almost an accident. I *might* have sent him away. I should have been justified in doing so. I’m answerable, you see, to the boy’s guardian.’

‘More than to his mother?’ she cried indignantly.

‘You should know that better than I,’ he said, with a painful smile. ‘I can’t tell you how much I deprecate this discussion. Why do you insist on it?’

Anger seemed to vanish from her eyes: she was all bewilderment, bewilderment tempered by something that could only be curiosity. She gazed at Heywood with undisguised interest. ‘I thought you, of all people alive, wouldn’t take the conventional view,’ she said wonderingly.

‘That suggests that *you* do,’ returned Heywood, with a smile. ‘Suggests, I mean, that you take the conventional view of Conington.’

'Well it is, isn't it, an unusually free and easy kind of school?'

'Because, you mean, the children don't sir their headmaster. True enough. But the ten commandments still have currency here, or some of them anyhow, in spite of the tales they tell of us.' He continued in a vein of airy geniality, trying to lead her from her point. 'I assure you there are crazier schools than Conington. In some ways we're positively oldfashioned, you'd find. Washing behind the ears is still recommended here, even to the juniors; and any child who throws his dinner at his teacher, or indeed at anyone, is obliged to go hungry till the next meal. But, yes, we *are* eccentric. We try to work with the child's natural curiosity instead of against it, and we don't require him to expiate his sins by copying out passages from the English poets.'

Mrs Shenley nodded.

'And then,' she said, 'there's sex, of course, isn't there?'

Heywood cordially agreed. 'There certainly is.'

For a moment he was at peace, a trifle complacently so, having, as he thought, taken her measure and tricked her into a harmless humour. But her next words proved his labour wasted, his ironies lost in the void of her sublime inattention.

'Mr Heywood, I want to ask you a question. What have you been told about me?'

'That you are not to have access to your son,' he said quickly.

'Yes, but what story have you been told?'

'Nothing. The bare facts. Nothing more.'

'Then *you* think, too, that a divorced woman has no rights. No elementary human rights. Not even the right to see her child. Do you? No, it's not possible—you've too much imagination. So why do you side with those people against me? It doesn't make sense, Mr Heywood. And

besides, you don't know the truth of it. I mean,' she added, 'the whole truth.'

He answered her with a shrug. 'The whole truth? That's a tall order, Mrs Shenley: more than ever I've aspired to. I have to be content with just that part of the truth that is relevant to the immediate situation.'

She rose: not, it seemed, with the intention of taking her leave, but in order, perhaps, to confront him with more effect. And indeed it served that purpose well: the dark flash of the eyes, the quick breathing, the proud carriage of the small head, these gave the effect of something more than beauty.

'You're being unfair,' she said disdainfully, 'and you know it. That's why you talk like a leading article.'

Heywood's smile would have disarmed a young woman less intent on her purpose.

'Something in that,' he admitted.

'Were you a friend of Richard's?' she asked suddenly, and seeing a genuine question in his eyes she continued without pause: 'Richard Adscombe, my husband: were you a friend of his?'

'I knew him only slightly.'

'Then perhaps you don't know that he was a cheat?'

Heywood's eyebrows went up: his surprise was apparent. But he quickly composed himself, and answered, with the effect of withdrawing a gesture that might have conceded too much:

'I know nothing at all to his discredit.'

'Oh, don't worry. He didn't cheat at cards—only at life. He promised me I should have Stuart and then cheated me out of him. If he hadn't promised me Stuart I'd never have let him divorce me.'

'I see,' said Heywood gravely.

He meant only that he heard. Whether or not to believe the story, he did not know. It lacked body so far, but it was not inherently improbable. Such things did happen,

and this particular possibility was one of several that he had lately glanced at, in pondering the little problem of young Adscombe. If it was true, if it could be established beyond reasonable doubt, then the whole situation was altered. From a purely pedantic point of view the rights and wrongs of the case were no concern of his in his capacity as headmaster, answerable only, as he had said, to the boy's legal guardian; but in practice it would make all the difference in the world if he were once convinced that Olive Shenley was being shabbily treated. Though even then there would remain a major obstacle to helping her, an obstacle which it was a point of principle with him not to override.

He looked at her and looked quickly away again, not caring to encounter the new and more powerful appeal in her eyes, the light of a wistful hope that broke through the brave young show of anger.

'Before you say any more, Mrs Shenley, may I make one point clear? I had hoped to keep it from you, but I think it's hardly possible to do so any longer. When you telephoned me yesterday, my own judgment told me that I had no right, at present, to sponsor a meeting between yourself and your little boy. But before giving you a definite answer to that effect I felt I had to consult someone else.'

'And did you—consult someone else?'

'Yes, I did. And his answer, I'm afraid, was quite conclusive.'

A suspicion of his meaning began slowly to dawn on her. 'Do you mean——'

'Yes, Mrs Shenley. I consulted Stuart Adscombe.'

II

A SMALL child even for his nine years, he stood idly at his bench in the carpenter's shop, wishing he hadn't come. He was frowning in a way that gave him an air of knowing more than a child should, and the expression of his sea-blue eyes, the knotted tension of his delicate features, reinforced a suggestion of paradox: conscious loneliness combined with shrinking aversion from a world for ever trying to break in upon him. This carpenter's shop was no shop in the ordinary sense, but merely the workroom where Conington 'people'—as the children of the school called themselves in mass—could be taught, if they wished, how to make various things with wood. It was perhaps the most easygoing arrangement in this easygoing school: you drifted in when you pleased, picked up a tool, and got to work. David Hancock, who ran the place, exercised authority so unobtrusively, in the true Conington manner, that once you had got used to him you hardly noticed he was there. Stuart Adscombe was not used to him, yet. He was not used to anything in this strange place. Because he was new, and reputed 'difficult', David tried to keep a special eye on Stuart without letting him know it: an endeavour of which the boy was sharply aware. He knew himself to be the object of special scrutiny, and he knew they were trying to prevent his knowing it. What he did not know was the purely benevolent motive behind their easy, breezy, somewhat over-acted friendliness. He was still wary, suspicious, thinking there must be a trick in it somewhere. At his kindergarten school he had suffered some minor indignities, but at least his life had been ordered and arranged for him, and there had been a sort of comfort in that. Here, at Conington, though every day that passed made things a little

easier for him, his spirit staggered under the burden of a new freedom. He was free to decide, forced to decide, upon matters far beyond his normal capacity. He could do as he pleased when most of the while he would rather have done as he was told. He had a vast desert of time in which to remember that last sight of his father.

‘Look, Stuart,’ said David Hancock, in his soft slow voice, ‘Angela’s making a box.’

Giving a quick glance in Angela Wintle’s direction, the boy moved a fraction of an inch further away from her.

‘Is she?’

David did not press the matter, and with exemplary cunning he addressed his next remark to Angela herself.

‘What kind of a box is it to be, Angela?’

Every time the word box was spoken Stuart imperceptibly winced, seeing the coffin again, sleek smooth hideously lovely new wood, with gleaming brass handles and a brass plate; smelling the heavy hothouse lilies, the warm upholstery of the carriage, Aunt Julia’s scented handkerchief squeezed into a wet ball, and his own sweating fingers bursting out of black gloves. He shut his eyes, for less than five seconds, and was back at once in a sick dream, insulated from the present moment.

A touch roused him.

‘Would you like to see my bowl that I made?’ said Arnold, the boy on his right, with a nudge that could not be ignored. ‘It’s a nice one: you’ll like it,’ he added with engaging confidence.

‘All right,’ said Stuart.

He looked at the bowl and admired it.

‘You didn’t make that!’

‘Yes I did.’

Stuart could only suppose he was being got at. ‘I bet you didn’t.’

‘How much?’ Arnold asked. He was not in the least offended. ‘A thousand pounds?’

Finding no answer Stuart said nothing, but he felt fairly comfortable with this new acquaintance, a little older than himself though he was. Arnold satisfied a need by taking him in tow and giving him something to do.

'Come along and I 'll show you,' he said.

Stuart, following close at his captor's heels, asked in an undertone: 'Are we *allowed* to talk in here?'

'Obviously,' said Arnold. 'Look, this is the lathe.'

'What does it do?'

'It makes wooden bowls,' said Arnold derisively, 'if you tell it how.'

Quick to scent and resent sarcasm Stuart turned his eyes away, but Arnold gave him another nudge and said, with idle, heartwarming gaiety: 'I 'll show you, one of these wet days.'

This not very brilliant inverted cliché was the current craze at Conington. Everyone was using it, and the more pointlessly the better. In a day or two it would be displaced by some other saying: meanwhile, during its term of office, it afforded great comfort and satisfaction to a hundred and one boys and girls.

'How do you start?' said Stuart.

'You get a block of wood from old David,' Arnold began. 'And then——'

'D' you mean Mr Hancock? What sort of wood?'

'Wooden wood,' said Arnold. 'Coal doesn't work so well,' he explained, 'and porridge would make a mess.'

Stuart saw that Arnold was being funny again, but he no longer suspected malice. His attention was already half-withdrawn, after its unwonted adventure into the outer world, and while Arnold, by fits and starts, went on to tell him how having roughly shaped your block of wood with a saw you fix it on the lathe, set the lathe turning, and get to work with chisel and plane, Stuart Adcombe, missing no word or gesture, was carried down the time-stream in a

bubble of recollection, hearing again the cold incisive voice of Aunt Julia saying to his father: 'Olive, my dear Richard, is simply . . .' something that Stuart couldn't pronounce, understand, or at this great distance of time remember. Yet he understood and remembered all too much, all too well. Aunt Julia's conversation with his father had left no doubt in Stuart's mind that his mother, in some dreadful unthinkable way, had changed into something quite different. She had become, it seemed, not merely a stranger, but a *thing*. A thing to shudder at, a thing the mere mention of which made his father's face go stiff and the eyes harden. Mother had gone, had vanished from their lives, and Stuart, with much patient iteration, had at last learnt not to ask for her. He must say nothing, except to his sodden pillow, of the ache and emptiness inside him, or of the face that sometimes lurked at his elbow, just out of sight, the face that was a leering cruel caricature of the lost mother. No use calling to her to protect him from *that*, for it was only *that* which would answer the call. 'Is Mummy dead?' he had asked Aunt Julia. 'No, dear,' said Aunt Julia. Swallowing back his sick excitement Stuart whispered: 'Will you take me to see her, Aunty?' 'No, dear,' said Aunt Julia again. 'And listen, Stuart. We must never never talk about that, especially in front of Daddy.' 'Why must we never?' Stuart asked, scowling to dissemble his feelings. 'Because it would make him very sad,' said Aunt Julia. 'And because Aunty says so,' she added, forestalling argument. 'Go to sleep now, like a good boy.' That was a long time ago. It had happened soon after his father came back from the nursing home. Stuart, with intervals of naughtiness and brooding which grew more brief as time went on, had done as he was bidden, had gone to sleep like a good boy. There had been quite happy times after that, including many walks, picnics, and games with his father, with whom he became better friends after his mother's going than ever before; but now, with his father gone, that ancient, that dead

and buried misery was alive again. The pain of being denied his father revived the earlier, sharper pain: the old dreams invaded him, the leering face lurked at his elbow, just out of sight, at the mind's edge, a something only half-apprehended.

Staring at the lathe he asked Arnold: 'How do you make it go?'

'We don't make it go, we let it stay where it is,' said Arnold. 'But we make it *turn*,' he went on, so blithely and inoffensively enjoying his own smartness that you could not dislike it or him. 'We make it turn by switching on the juice. Like this, see?' He demonstrated: the lathe began whirring. 'Tell you what, we 'll make one if you like. We 'll make a wooden pot.'

He pronounced *pot* in the French fashion, and grinned radiantly, enchanted with the folly of his idea.

'All right,' said Stuart, not noticing the joke. 'I saw a lathe once,' he remarked after a pause. 'It was different. There was a man making chairs. He worked it with his foot.' The scene came vividly back to him. He and his father, on one of their walks, had paused at the open door of a cottage whose small front garden was filled with clean timber. He saw the old square-bearded man sitting at his lathe, one foot on the treadle. He smelt the cool, rich autumn air: the very moment was re-created, with all the cosiness and excitement of being out with his father, the walking, the talking, the sight of fresh places and things: trees and brooks, wide fields and hedge-shadowed lanes, barns, haystacks, churches, unexpected cottages, cattle browsing, and a horizon like a painted frieze, where men and boys, on the crest of a long wheat-field, were pitching the neatly stooked corn into waggons.

'David, can we have some wood?' Arnold sang out. 'We want to make something.'

He followed up his request by running across the workshop to where David Hancock was sitting. On the way he

narrowly missed colliding with his headmaster, who at that moment came in.

Mr Heywood was looking for Stuart and had been directed to the carpenter's shop by someone who had chanced to see the boy enter it.

'Hullo, Stuart! How are you getting on?'

'All right, thank you sir.'

Heywood put a hand on the boy's shoulder and steered him gently towards the doorway.

'Let's get into the sunshine, shall we, and have a talk. What are you working at? With David I mean. Making a rabbit-hutch?'

'No sir,' said Stuart. He wondered desperately what was in the wind.

'Most of them start with rabbit-hutches,' Heywood remarked. 'They were now in the open air. 'Are you fond of rabbits, Stuart?'

'I did have a Belgian hare, sir. But he died.'

'Ah yes, they do, don't they. People don't very often call me sir, but there's no reason why you shouldn't if you want to. Do you remember your mother, Stuart?'

Heywood felt a convulsive twitch in the small shoulder he had hold of. He stole a sidelong glance at the shut face.

'It's a long time since you've seen her, I expect.'

The boy came to a dead halt. He slipped from Heywood's gentle grasp and stood stiffly, with hanging head, frowning fixedly at the ground. He made no suggestion of reply, no sign of having heard the question.

In the dark of his mind was the fear that if he looked anywhere but at the ground, he would see it at last, that wicked watching face.

'Supposing she were to come here to see you,' his kindly torturer continued, 'would you like that?'

He heard Aunt Julia's voice; he saw his father's grey smile on that last day; and all the passion of his longing for

the lost mother added violence to his fear of finding her different, as they had said, or had seemed to say.

He shook his head vigorously; tried to say something. Heywood bent down to continue the conversation on more equal terms. But seeing what he saw in the child's eyes he was answered.

III

WHEN Heywood had seen Mrs Shenley off the premises he imagined he had got rid of her. That she might turn up again and be a little troublesome was a possibility he admitted but shrank from entertaining. The main thing was that for the time being at any rate she was gone. But in this supposition he found himself mistaken. At intervals all the rest of the day a vivid sense of her presence, startling as a visible ghost and far more appealing, flashed uninvited into his mind. He recalled scraps of that dialogue, not for their content but for some indefinable quality inhering in their occasion. But he was not to be taken unawares. That Olive Shenley was a curiously and subtly attractive creature was neither here nor there, he robustly assured himself. He was not a young susceptible man, his judgment at the mercy of a lovely face, a soft warm voice, a feline grace of movement: something more than the charms catalogued in a conventional Elizabethan lyric was needed to tempt him to take sides in a matter on which he had no evidence. Indeed a plainer, less alluring advocate, he believed, would have stood a better chance of doing that. If it counted at all, her beauty counted against her, since it put him on his guard. For all that, she did give the impression of sincerely believing what she said. She was convinced, if not convincing, convinced of being the victim of a cruel injustice. What had she so passionately said, she believed: that Richard Adscombe was a cheat.

Heywood's recollection of Adscombe was admittedly slight, but such as it was it told against that bitter contention. The two men had been members of the same London club, the Millenium, a nexus of sombre spacious rooms upholstered in saddlebags and populated largely though not exclusively

by taciturn old gentlemen; and on the few occasions when Heywood had exchanged words with him, long before the question of Stuart's schooling could arise, Adscombe had impressed him as being a kindly if somewhat reserved middle-aged man with an easy quiet manner, exceptional only in the degree of his moral toleration. It was difficult to believe, on the face of it, that such a man could be capable of mere petty vindictiveness against a wife some twenty years younger than himself. Even as he framed it Heywood detected a certain ingenuousness in this argument: that very disparity in age opened the door to much doubt and conjecture, and it could not be assumed that the husband of a young wife would always behave in a crisis as generously as his public character suggested. But at least there was something of a mystery here, a contradiction on the surface if no more; at least there was, so to speak, a *prima facie* case to put before a jury. In the course of a few days Heywood did not so much decide, as take it for granted, that he himself must be the jury in this case, as well as judge, investigator, and counsel for both sides. Not deliberately, but by force of a gradual intensification of his interest, he set himself to discover the truth. A childless widower, with no vital personal preoccupation apart from his school, he had energy to spare for this pursuit, which acquired for him, moreover, the specious colour of a duty since it concerned, indirectly, a child in his official care. The coming of the summer vacation relieved him, for the time being, of responsibility for Stuart, who on the last day of term was called for and taken home by his aunt, the watchful formidable Miss Adscombe; and at the same time it set his mind free to dwell on this problem of the boy's parents.

Formidable represents only a part of Heywood's notion of Miss Adscombe, and scarcely at all young Stuart's. The boy greeted his aunt, not gaily, but with a genuine responsive affection, forgetting for once that he was under observation. But indeed not gaily: rather with an effect, tragic to witness,

of release from some inner tension, and a partial release only, bringing neither happiness nor contentment but at least a merciful momentary peace. Heywood, in whose room the reunion took place, was divided between pleasure in this evidence that Stuart was at home with his guardian and regret that the boy was being required to make yet another psychological readjustment just as he was beginning—at the end of term—to settle down in the new environment. Three months in the free and easy social atmosphere of Conington did wonders for most difficult children, and it had done wonders for Stuart Adscombe; but Heywood privately wondered whether three months was long enough, whether this return to the comparative solitude of home, and to the over-anxious solicitude of Miss Adscombe, might not tie him into knots again.

‘Have you had a nice term, dear?’

‘Yes, thank you, Aunt Julia.’

She looked at her charge intently, her severe elderly features softened and rejuvenated by kindness. Heywood thought he had a glimpse of the young woman she had been thirty or forty years earlier: angular and conscientious, resolved to do her duty by everyone, the fond possessive sister of a younger brother. Plausible guesswork, he admonished himself: nothing more. He was a man who preferred evidence to intuition and was quick to dispute with those who assert that they are one and the same thing, though in practice, in his dealings with parents and children, he did sometimes confuse the two. If he was tempted to adjudge Miss Adscombe a typical English spinster of the upper-middle class, embodiment of conventional good intentions and unimaginative piety and moral prejudice, he dismissed the temptation; for he had a saving belief in individuality and recognized the shallowness of treating living people as types.

‘How long will it take you to get ready, dear?’ Aunt Julia asked. ‘Can you manage by yourself?’

'I'm ready now, Aunty.'

'What! Everything packed?'

'Matron helped me,' Stuart explained. 'I've only got to say goodbye to a few people.'

'I'm glad you've made some nice friends,' said Aunt Julia: unnecessarily in Heywood's opinion, who thought a thing so natural and so important as making friends should be treated as a matter of course, not anxiously applauded. 'You didn't tell me about that in your letters, dear,' she added, gently reproachful.

Seeing the boy's selfconsciousness returning Heywood said quickly, with a smile: 'Letter-writing's not our strong point at Conington, is it, Stuart? There are so many other things to do.'

'Oh, Stuart was very good,' she said, woefully misunderstanding his intention. 'He wrote me a letter every week. Never once missed.'

More's the pity, thought Heywood.

'But of course I want to know *everything*,' she went on, brightly, meaning (Heywood admitted) no harm, poor woman! 'Never mind, dear. We shall have all the more to talk about in the holidays.'

'Look, Stuart,' said Heywood, intervening, 'how would it be if you were to run along now, and say goodbye to people, and come back in about—half an hour, shall we say?'

Stuart looked towards his aunt.

'I'll take care of Aunt Julia,' Heywood assured him. 'She shan't escape. I'm sorry,' he said, when the door shut behind Stuart, 'that you can't stay to lunch. You'd like to have a talk about Stuart, I expect. I do hope you'll find we've managed to help him a little. I rather think you will, too. But he'll do better still next term, unless my diagnosis is all wrong. At first he seemed at a loss, shy of joining in with the other children, in their games and so on. But that's often the case with an only child. Introspection

becomes a deep-rooted habit, and at first they tend to resent anything that threatens to shake them out of it.'

Miss Adscombe nodded. 'I know what you mean. That secretiveness!'

'Well—yes and no,' said Heywood. 'Every child, I think, except the quite abnormally extroverted, values its privacy. I would deplore any attempt to—how shall I put it?—take the secret places by storm. One doesn't want to pry into the mind, or try to force confidences. That's fatal.' He smiled disarmingly, hoping that Miss Adscombe would have the intelligence to apply his remarks personally and the tact to appear not to do so. 'But it's only the adult, anyhow, who can easily commit that kind of violence. A child's own contemporaries—I mean of course other children—are his best companions. Each is too firmly self-centred in his own little ego to have time—even if he had the skill—to probe into that of another. My point is that privacy, what you called just now secretiveness, needn't involve personal solitariness, shrinking from contacts, not joining in whatever work or fun happens to be going. Stuart, I'm glad to say, *is* beginning to join in. In fact he's made quite a good beginning. He's no longer afraid of people.'

'I'm delighted to hear it, Mr Heywood. I don't mind admitting to you now that I've been anxious.'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

'You mustn't take it amiss if I say that Conington, with all its splendid modern merits, wasn't the *kind* of school I'd have chosen for Stuart myself. But my poor brother, only a fortnight before his death, expressed himself so decidedly in its favour that I felt bound to make the experiment.' She smiled at Heywood: a sudden gleam in a grey wintry landscape. There was something about this schoolmaster which invited confidence. 'I sometimes took it upon me to dispute my brother's decisions when he was alive, Mr Heywood. But now his wishes are sacred.'

Heywood nodded sympathetically. After a moment's

silence he remarked: 'We 're all fond of Stuart here. I don't need to tell you he 's a very charming little boy.'

'Yes, isn't he! And the image of his father!'

Maybe, Heywood thought, but he has his mother's beautiful eyes.

'There 's something I perhaps ought to mention to you, Miss Adscombe. I think you anticipated something of the kind. A Mrs Shenley, who I understand is Stuart's mother, made an attempt to see him this term.'

'Ah!' Miss Adscombe's eyes narrowed. Her face became a mask of enmity. 'She failed, I hope!'

'I succeeded in putting her off,' Heywood said, speaking rather with an air of admitting a defeat than announcing a victory. 'Your instructions on the point left me no alternative. But I 'm bound to tell you I found it an uncongenial duty.'

'Very likely.' Her voice was ever so slightly contemptuous. 'A pretty face will always win sympathy from a man. But I 'm afraid I can't modify those instructions, Mr Heywood. The woman must not be allowed to approach him. That's an absolute condition of his remaining in your care.'

'Quite so,' said Heywood easily. 'And though we've got a large waiting-list at Conington I should be sorry to lose Stuart. One hates leaving a job when it 's only just begun. But I shall carry out my part of the bargain with more assurance if I 'm convinced of its necessity, or rather its justice.'

'You can hardly expect me, Mr Heywood, to enter into the unsavoury details. There are things one doesn't discuss.'

'Not at Conington,' he said with a smile, and instantly repented, annoyed with himself for encouraging her to suppose that the scandal talked about Conington morals was perhaps true, after all. 'We discuss anything here, you know, provided it 's relevant or otherwise profitable. We regard that as the indispensable basis of true education.'

Naturally,' he went on, 'I don't want to pry into family affairs. But if one's to do this . . . police work'—his hesitation hardly softened the phrase—'one likes to be convinced that it's necessary.'

Not curtly, but with a somewhat frigid dignity, Miss Adscombe said: 'As Stuart's legal guardian I assure you that it is. I think that should be enough. The point is for me to decide, and my own opinion is reinforced by what I know my brother would have wished—in fact *did* wish. He wished that they should never meet again.'

Could that be true of the mild-mannered Adscombe? Heywood recoiled from the picture of implacable spite which her words conjured up.

'That was going rather far, wasn't it? Ultimately, Stuart will decide for himself whether or not his mother is to remain a stranger to him.'

'That is so. But meanwhile it is my duty to protect him, and I shall not flinch from that duty. The court gave my brother sole custody of his child, and appointed me to be sole legal guardian after his death. In such a case, and I've looked into it and can quote you chapter and verse, in such a case the parent declared to be unfit to have the custody of the child shall not, upon the death of the other parent, be entitled as of right to the custody or guardianship . . . The authorities are quite clear on the point.'

'But that hardly arises, does it?' Heywood mildly ventured. 'I don't imagine Mrs Shenley is trying to claim custody, or guardianship either. It's merely a question, surely, of what the law calls access: namely, shall she or shall she not be allowed to see and speak with the child? I find it hard to believe that the court deprived Mrs Shenley of *that* right. That's only done, I fancy, in the most extreme cases.'

Miss Adscombe rose from her chair. 'Whether her case was an extreme one by Conington standards, Mr Heywood, I haven't yet the means of knowing. Perhaps you can tell *me* that, when I say that during the trial two co-respondents

were cited, and after the decree she married neither of them.'

'I see,' said Heywood, meditatively. 'Even that's not conclusive, is it? If I were concerned to defend the young woman, and I'm certainly not, Miss Adscombe,' he earnestly assured her, 'I should ask whether the charges were admitted or denied, proved or dismissed. And so on and so forth. Never mind that. The only point is: was she in fact denied access?'

She confronted his question with a smile of ingratiating stubbornness.

'I don't agree with you that that's the point we're concerned with. I think the point is that whatever technical right of access she may have retained she didn't in fact exercise it. In the last years of my brother's life she made no attempt, no attempt whatever, to see her child. She had, I suppose, other fish to fry. Or perhaps she was too much ashamed of herself, as she had every reason to be. It's only now, now he's dead, that she chooses to fancy herself a wronged mother.'

'I see,' said Heywood again, judicially neutral.

'I must ask you a plain question,' she said sharply. 'Are you on her side? Or on mine?'

Shrugging his shoulders Heywood said with a smile: 'And you shall have a plain answer, Miss Adscombe. Am I on Mrs Shenley's side? No. Am I on your side? No. I don't care a button about the rights and wrongs of the affair except as they affect Stuart himself. My duty is to him.'

'I appreciate that,' said Miss Adscombe. Her tone was warm. She gave him her hand in farewell. For at that moment Stuart stole back into the room and stood wistfully at her elbow, eager to be gone.

IV

THE Millenium Club, situated at a point equidistant from the London Library, the National Gallery, the British Museum, and sundry theatres, provided a man in Heywood's position with a most agreeable home from home, and during the years of his widowhood he had formed the habit of resorting to it at intervals. Especially in the long school vacation, at a time when many of his fellow-members were leaving town hungry for a sight of green fields and breaking seas, he was glad, perversely as some thought, to exchange the rural environment of Conington for a taste of London. The double disaster of his wife's death in childbed, though now an old story, had a trick of recurring to mind with a painful vividness at Conington in these long vacations, when for eight weeks the place was empty of children. He and Clare had waited for a child, and that she had lost her life in the vain attempt to achieve their hearts' desire was something for which he obscurely and irrationally blamed himself. Subconsciously, with equally bad logic, he had averted his mind from the possibility of marrying again, lest history should repeat itself, his powerful impulse to fatherhood being held in check, and driven underground, by reluctance to risk a second woman's life. For the rest, though women attracted and charmed him not less than of old, it was axiomatic with him that no one could take Clare's place. There had been episodes since, but no thought of a permanent relationship.

A few weeks at the Club could give him just what he wanted, peace and comfort, change of scene and society, stimulus and relaxation, and the unobtrusive attentions of the club servants, every one of whom was familiarly known to him, an old and trusted acquaintance, with the excellent

Grainger at their head. Here in this easy, male, civilized atmosphere, temperately warmed with a casual uninquisitive friendliness, first-rate conversation was to be had for the seeking. So, equally, were silence and seclusion: a man might show within limits as much of himself, and certainly as little, as he pleased: he could speak his mind among men, men for whom good talk was one of the chief graces of civilization, or he could retire into a corner and be quiet, with no fear either of being intruded upon or of being regarded as morose.

Most happy events have the air of happy chance: it is the uncalculated, if not the incalculable, that gratifies us. Had he considered the question Heywood might have supposed that the Club would be a likely place in which to begin his Adcombe inquest, since its subject had been a member there, and well known to many who were still members. But in fact he had supposed no such thing, and when one afternoon he idly mentioned the name to the man in the neighbouring armchair, it was with a childish delighted surprise that he heard the answer.

‘Oddly enough,’ said Pointing, ‘I was at school with him.’

Heywood quivered with excitement, like the horse that smelleth the battle from afar. He felt a sudden sharp gratitude to Pointing, as though that slight if pleasant acquaintance had made him a handsome gift or done him some other conspicuous kindness.

Hiding these emotions behind a decent display of disinterest he casually asked: ‘Why oddly?’

‘If I say merely that I was at school with him,’ said Pointing, ‘you ’ll imagine I knew him intimately.’

‘And didn’t you?’ Heywood’s hopes sank to zero, but the impetus of his former impulse kept him going. ‘Not so surprising really. A man can’t know intimately everyone he was at school with.’

‘No,’ said Pointing. ‘Not even if he runs across him forty years afterwards in a London club. That’s really

where the oddness comes in, for me. In that re-encounter, a lifetime later.'

'It's a wonder you recognized each other,' Heywood remarked.

'We didn't, don't you see? It was a little prep school in Hampshire that we both went to. Nothing later than that. So we hadn't set eyes on each other since we were both round about twelve years old. I knew him to nod to in this club for some weeks before realizing that he belonged to a remote chapter of my past.'

'How did you find out? Or was it he who found out?'

'Not he,' said Pointing emphatically. 'I suppose the name, not a very usual one, set a chord vibrating in me somewhere, stirred some dim memory, so that presently, whenever he cropped up so to speak, I began saying to myself: "Adscombe. . . Adscombe . . . what is there connected with that name?" And finally I got it, or at least a clue to it, for there floated up into consciousness a memory of that faraway school, floated up through the opaque confusion, the sediment or what you will, of later and more significant memories: public school, university, travel, one's "career" as they call it, to say nothing of marriage, children, and so on. A thousand and one things.'

Pointing glanced somewhat shyly at Heywood, as if in half-apology for his insistence on the obvious.

'Of course,' said Heywood. 'Remembering is a most fantastic operation. But for that matter so is forgetting. In fact this whole affair of time——'

'Exactly!' said Pointing eagerly. 'Time!' He had had fifteen years more of that mysterious commodity to deal with than Heywood. 'One's sometimes tempted to think of one's past life in geological terms, as a series of strata, the early years being buried under successive layers of crusted or petrified experience. But it's a misleading picture, don't you think? Time isn't vertical, it's horizontal, not merely an ever-flowing stream, as old Isaac

Watts said, but an ever-broadening stream, a broadening continuum of varying colours like the colours of the rainbow, infancy boyhood youth middle-age and the rest all flowing along side by side, each colour different yet shading at its edge into the next. And if time is like that, so is memory. Maybe they're one and the same thing. Anyhow, what puzzled me about my ultimate rediscovery of Adscombe was not the remembering but the failure to find any connexion between past and present, except by machinery, as it were. In short, by the logical process of collecting evidence, fixing dates and places. When at last I screwed up my courage and tackled Adscombe I began remembering more and more about him, but I couldn't, and never did, recognize the boy Adscombe in the man he had become. He was there of course. He *must* have been there. And it wasn't that he'd suffered any dramatic change of character, so far as I know. It was simply that for me there were two quite distinct Adscombes: a boy of eleven or twelve and a man of, say, fifty-five to sixty. And I couldn't for the life of me connect them, except logically, by the evidence.'

'But you did,' said Heywood, 'establish *that* connexion?'

'Yes. There's no doubt about the facts. It was only the sensation, the feeling of recognition, that was wanting. Perhaps it was asking too much, to expect that. But you know—or don't you?—the excitement of coming upon someone who belongs to one's childhood, the feeling, or at least the hope, of recapturing a vanished past, of having it proved that memory isn't a mere private illusion. Well, Adscombe somehow defeated that hope. We fell into conversation in this very room, as you and I have done. I'd never actually spoken to him before. I said: "Do you, by any chance, know a place in Hampshire called Liphook?" He said yes, he had once known it well. He had been for a time at school within a few miles of the place. I named the school. He said: "Quite right. How did you know? I'd almost forgotten the name myself." He was courteously

interested. Hardly more than that. "I'm pretty sure," I said, "that we were there together." We compared dates, and it put the thing beyond doubt. "You probably don't remember me," I said. "Pointing. Arthur Pointing." It was obvious that the name recalled nothing to him. "But I remember you," I said, meaning that I remembered a boy called Adscombe, not this austere-looking, grey-haired man who used the same name. "As children," I reminded him—but he didn't remember—"we used to run neck and neck in the writing exam at the end of term." In those days, Heywood, believe it or not, handwriting was actually *taught* in schools. You modern fellows have put a stop to that, I hear. And, while I was speaking, the memory became more vivid, details began filling in, of one particular occasion, when I beat him by one mark. The class was hushed. The master who had been marking the papers read out the results to us. "Adscombe, 98." A rustle of excited admiration. The betting was on Adscombe. Nevertheless some eyes were turned towards me, for I was known to be a stalwart performer in that line. I felt infernally selfconscious, and so, no doubt, did he. Presently: "Pointing, 99." That clinched it. The drama of the thing made the little boys gasp. Adscombe blushed, and I was covered in happy confusion. No boy, of course, could get a full hundred marks: that would have implied that his work was faultless and would be calculated to put him above himself. Well, all this came rushing back to me as I waited for Adscombe's answer. And, gradually, much more. Adscombe had forgotten that ancient rivalry. Nor did he in fact remember me, though after a while, under my spate of reminiscences, he politely pretended otherwise. "Surely," I said, "you remember that fight you had with—what was his name now?" • Yes, *that* he did remember, though not, any more than I did, the name of his enemy. I remembered, just in time, not to pursue that subject; for suddenly yet another memory came pouncing upon me, and with it the

ghost of a childish vicarious shame. At the beginning of that term it became known that Adscombe's mother had died during the holidays. And it began to be whispered, whether truly or not I never knew and don't know to this day, that she had hanged herself in the coach-house. God knows how these stories get about. Small boys are inquisitive and have few scruples about asking point-blank questions, but there was something about Adscombe that made a question on this point impossible even to the boldest. What *I* remembered, and what I daren't remind Adscombe of, was how the famous fight had started.'

'And how had it started?' Heywood asked.

'One day a group of us were mildly baiting him, mildly at first, and then not so mildly, for what we were pleased to call his "soppiness". Discipline, in practice though not in theory, was lax in that school. The headmaster had a great idea of trusting to the boys' honour. An admirable idea too, but it didn't always work out as he intended. It was left to each boy to keep a record of the marks earned day by day in class, and nothing was easier than to falsify the record, just a little you know, in one's own favour. The practice was known as "sticking on", and since everyone did it, no one, we argued, was any the worse. We discovered however, I've forgotten how, that Adscombe would have none of it, and set his solemn sensitive little face against it. Because this attitude implied a criticism of ourselves, and because anyhow it was eccentric, we resented it. An excess of virtue stank in our lordly young nostrils. We knew him to be quick at learning, reasonably industrious, and not outstandingly good at games; and his staying at the bottom of the form was therefore a perpetual reproach to us, a pointed accusation. His stubborn refusal to even things up and ease our consciences by "sticking on", as nearly all the rest of us did, well, we thought it priggish and we called it, as I say, soppy. So there he stood, defying us, answering evasively, but by his own admission convicted of honesty. And we

nagged him. He thought himself clever, we said. Sucking up. Putting on airs. Wanting to be better than other people. When he walked away we walked after him, made a ring round him, wouldn't let him pass. Well then, we said, *why* wouldn't he do it? *Why?* If he'd only tell us why, we said, we'd leave him alone. And at last, after some minutes of this verbal persecution, he gave tongue. "Oh all right," he said, flushing deeply. "If you want to know, I promised my mother." There followed an uncomfortable silence. We didn't know where to look or what to say. Everybody knew about Adscombe's mother, and never before had he mentioned her. Then a painful thing happened. Someone sniggered. I fancy it was sheer nervousness, a sort of mechanical reflex, and that the unfortunate sniggerer would have been ready to abase himself in apology. But he was not given a chance to do that. "You filthy cad!" said Adscombe, and sprang at him like a tiger, landing him a terrific slap in the face. A real stinger, to which there could be only one answer. 'The fight was on.'

V

THE story gave Heywood something, but it told him little enough about Adscombe the man. It merely underlined what he already knew, that the amiable and self-contained Adscombe presented to the world little or no clue to his intimate character. Pointing insisted, again and again, that his having in the distant past been a schoolfellow made him not less but more of a stranger. Heywood gathered that that first conversation between them had been the beginning and end of their renewed intercourse. True, Adscombe had, finally, made a polite transparent pretence of at least half-remembering that a boy called Pointing had been at school with him; but their acquaintanceship remained of the slightest, and in subsequent encounters they either nodded to each other and passed on, or at the most exchanged a few civil words. Their common past was never alluded to again by either of them. For Pointing it had lost its bloom: his eager interest had been nipped by the frost of that unresponsiveness. Indeed, he felt foolish, for having, as he told Heywood, 'gushed' about it to a man for whom its memory no longer existed.

But though he did not become Adscombe's friend, and knew no more of his inner life than any other chance acquaintance, he was, because of their peculiar relationship, more apt than another to notice his entrances and exits. Outside the Club they never met: inside, since both used it frequently, they could hardly help doing so. One day, he was spending an idle half-hour after lunch in the billiard-room, not playing—'I have too much respect for my fellow-members to ask them to put up with my billiards' he told Heywood—but watching others play while he sipped his coffee, when something happened. Paul Franzy came in.

'Came into the billiard-room, you mean?' said Heywood. His attention had wandered for a moment. 'Paul Franzy?'

'Yes,' said Pointing. 'He writes. Novels, I believe. You know him?'

'I've met him here of course,' said Heywood. 'So Paul Franzy came into the billiard-room. And then?'

'It was his first appearance here as a member. His election had only just gone through. And I happened to know that it was Adscombe who had proposed him.'

'I was wondering where Adscombe came in,' said Heywood.

'The way Adscombe comes in is that he was one of the fellows whose exploits with the cue I was watching. He hadn't, I think, much wanted to play. He had been sitting by himself, shut in with his own thoughts. Normally a man is free to do as he likes in this place. He can dance or sit out, so to speak, without being pestered for reasons. That's one of the things I most like about us. We're not stuffy and silent, like some clubs I know. Nor, thank God, are we breezy and back-slapping.'

'Except, perhaps, Baines,' Heywood remarked.

'You astound me,' said Pointing. 'Have you second sight, Heywood? Because, as it happens, Baines *was* of the party. Baines, moreover, was at his heartiest, and Baines wanted to make up a four for snooker. He as good as dragged the reluctant Adscombe to the table, by pleading and cajolery and refusing to take No for an answer.'

'Bad show,' said Heywood.

'I agree. I was sorry for Adscombe. But I'm bound to say that having surrendered to the tedious persuasions he buckled down to it and put up an extraordinarily good game. He played with an almost tragic concentration, and he was at the top of his form. And then . . .' Pointing broke off, to light his pipe.

'And then Paul Franzy came in,' Heywood said.

'There's something extraordinarily soothing, don't you

think, about any billiard-table game. I mean from the spectator's point of view—mine. The smooth run of the ball, the ivory click, the level sward of green baize. It's always had a charm for me, ever since as a child I stayed with an elderly uncle at Richmond who was an addict of the game. And it's better still here, in an atmosphere of cigar smoke, and with tankards of ale conveniently disposed about the room, and a genial running commentary going on all the time. Our billiard-room is the most peaceful spot on earth, Heywood. A wonderful sedative after one's daily dose of world-politics. One feels that nothing in the smallest degree disagreeable could happen there.'

'But something did, eh?' Heywood prompted him.

'He came in by the swing door, Paul Franzy did, and stood there, hesitating, looking round. A big, shy sort of fellow in tweeds, and looking a bit like a farmer. Adscombe, who had just finished his break, stood with his back to the door, chalking his cue, but with one dutiful eye cocked at the table and following his opponent's game. By the merest chance I had both men in my immediate view and my eye happened to glance from one to the other. Adscombe was unconscious that his old friend Paul was standing within five yards of him. But I saw the light of recognition dawn in Paul's eye, and his amused affectionate smile as he moved forward, thinking to take him by surprise. "Hullo, Dick!" he said. For a split second Adscombe stood rigid. The hand that held the chalk stopped in mid-air. I doubt if anyone besides myself could have spotted that change in him. Not even Paul, because Paul couldn't, as I did, see his face. If you think I'm going to say that his face changed, became suddenly sinister, you're wrong. The extraordinary, the sinister thing, is that it didn't change. I knew that he knew Paul was there. But it wasn't his face that betrayed him: it was that moment's unnatural stillness.'

'And then?' Heywood said, hoping to be spared any further digression.

‘And then, from being dead-still, like a piece of sculpture, he came to life again. Without even a glance at Paul, without even appearing to avoid him, he moved away from the billiard-table, stood his cue in a corner, and walked quietly out of the room. And he never came back.’

‘You mean he didn’t come back to finish his game?’

‘I mean he never came back. He walked out of the billiard-room and out of the Club, and never entered it again. That was positively his last appearance in this place.’

‘How not to behave to a new member,’ said Heywood reflectively.

‘Especially,’ said Pointing, ‘a new member whose election one has oneself proposed.’

‘Quite.’ Heywood pondered for a moment. ‘And what did Franz do about it?’

‘Poor Paul, in his innocence, simply couldn’t make it out. He said nothing, because, I suppose, there was nothing to say, and because he was virtually among strangers. My own guess is that for a moment anyhow he persuaded himself, against all the evidence, that Adscombe had been unaware of him and would be back again in a minute or two. Naturally I didn’t feel called upon to enlighten him; and, as for the players, they were too intent on their game to have attention for anything else.’

‘But,’ said Heywood, ‘when Adscombe’s turn to play came round——’

‘Exactly. Then they missed him. Baines, who’s a friendly soul when all’s said, gave Paul a hospitable “Hullo!” and asked where the devil Adscombe had disappeared to. Paul undertook to go and see.’

‘And he did?’

‘In five minutes he was back with his report. Mr Adscombe had left the building. The hall porter had seen him go out. “Odd fish!” said Baines tolerantly. “Never known a man do that before. How about taking his place,

sir?" he said to Paul. And that's how it was. Paul picked up Adscombe's cue and they finished their game . . . By the way,' said Pointing, lowering his voice, 'there he is.' 'Who?'

'Paul Franzy. He 's just come in.'

VI

THOUGH he knew him very well by sight, was in fact on nodding terms with him, Heywood could not forbear to steal a covert glance at Paul Franzy, whom, in the light of what Pointing had told him, he felt he was seeing for the first time. So this was the man who had inspired such bitterness in Adscombe! He would hardly have recognized him from Pointing's description—'a big, shy sort of fellow in tweeds, and looking a bit like a farmer'—a description that reflected, Heywood thought, Arthur Pointing's urban bias and sartorial correctness. He surmised that everyone who did not wear dark cloth and white linen, and a stiff, well-starched white collar, looked to old Pointing 'a bit like a farmer'. To Heywood, who was personally acquainted with several farmers, Franzy's appearance did not suggest agriculture, nor anything else with arduous associations: it only provoked in him the ingenuous wonder that this large, loosely-built man, with lazy eyes and a not very ready tongue, should be master of so precise and energetic a prose style.

Not to be caught staring, lest his curiosity should be apparent to its object, Heywood quickly shifted his glance, with no more than half a nod to the newcomer. Pointing evidently had no such inhibition. He raised his hand in a stately gesture of invitation.

'Hullo, Paul!'

Paul Franzy drifted across the room. 'What are you two fellows conspiring about?'

It was merely a form of words. It meant nothing. The tolerant, unsuspicious smile made that much obvious. But Heywood, in spite of common sense, was startled by it, and in a mood to admire the audacity of Pointing's next remark.

'We were talking about Richard Adscombe,' Pointing said. 'You knew him better than any of us, I fancy.'

If Paul was surprised he did not betray it, unless by taking rather longer than necessary to consider the question.

‘Possibly I did. We were friends for thirty-five years or more. And what have you been saying about Richard?’ He glanced, with disarming innocence, from Pointing to Heywood, and back again. ‘He was a great loss to us here.’

Feeling that an explanation was called for, Heywood said: ‘I ’m interested because his son Stuart is one of my boys.’

‘Heywood runs a co-educational school in Gloucestershire,’ Pointing explained. ‘One of these splendid modern schools,’ he added, grinning. ‘The children all call him Bill and won’t do any work unless they want to.’

‘They don’t call me Bill,’ said Heywood mildly, ‘because Bill isn’t my name. Stuart Adscombe’s an attractive child’—he hurried on, anxious that the subject should not be sidetracked—‘but a bit of a problem. You know him of course, Franzy?’

‘Hardly,’ said Paul. ‘I did know him in his earlier years, but now . . . How’s he shaping?’

‘It’s early to say. I’ve only had him for a term. There are things in his psychology, you know, that make me curious to know what his father was like. And nobody can tell me. There seems to be a bit of a mystery about him.’

‘Really? I’m not aware of any.’

‘Pointing was at prep school with him,’ Heywood said, plunging boldly on, ‘but that doesn’t take us very far.’

‘Well,’ said Paul Franzy, with a queer smile, ‘if you want the truth about Richard Adscombe, it’s very simple, and I can give it to you in a sentence. He was little short of a saint in his austerity, and in his judgments of his fellow-men the most charitable and magnanimous person I’ve known.’

There was silence for a moment. Pointing merely pursed his lips and nodded sagaciously, as if to imply that

his own impression was confirmed; and Heywood, staring intently at his own toes, tried to come to terms with the astonishment that had seized upon him. Having no reason to suppose Franzy to be a prodigiously good actor he found it difficult to question his sincerity. Yet that Franzy should have said what he had said was impossible to reconcile with what had seemed to be the obvious implications of Pointing's story. But if the fellow was bluffing!—the mere suspicion nettled Heywood and emboldened him to try new tactics. In the excitement of this inquest he was beginning to lose his courteous scruples and to assume that it was his right, if not positively his duty, to get at the ultimate truth, and this notwithstanding that for the moment he had forgotten Stuart, and Aunt Julia, and the point from which his investigation had started.

'Incidentally,' he said, throwing out his line, 'I suppose he was first-rate at his job?'

'A good surgeon, yes. One takes that for granted. And a good editor too,' said Paul Franzy. 'He was the only medical man I've known who had a head for metaphysics and an ear for music, as well as . . .' He waved away the unspoken part of his sentence.

'Then you've been unlucky, my dear Paul,' said Pointing. 'I've known dozens. I know you think we're a godless and unimaginative crew, but——'

Paul laughed. 'I'd forgotten you were in the same line.'

Heywood said meditatively: 'It's public knowledge, of course, that Adscombe divorced his wife.'

'Yes?' said Paul.

His air of disinterest was a little too impudent, Heywood decided.

'Which suggests,' Heywood went on, 'that there was at any rate a limit to his magnanimity. As indeed why shouldn't there be?'

'Where a man of Richard Adscombe's kind is concerned, I think we can assume,' said Paul, 'that he had good reason

for what he did. And divorce, after all, is no uncommon thing these days.'

'I agree,' said Heywood, 'and for heaven's sake don't imagine I'm criticizing Adscombe. I'm only trying to get a true picture of him. Divorce, as you say, is far from uncommon. What *is* uncommon, even now, is for a man to divorce his wife instead of being a little gentleman and providing her with evidence to divorce *him* on. I think it's a ridiculous convention myself, but it's the sort of old-world gallantry that one might almost, don't you think, have expected from such a man as he.'

'Unless,' suggested Pointing, 'he had invincible scruples which precluded his either committing adultery or falsely claiming to have done so.'

'Even that is possible,' said Paul, with the smile of a man who is giving nothing away.

'Especially in the editor of a philosophical quarterly,' Heywood conceded.

'Yes,' said Pointing. 'Now one comes to think of it, that was an odd enterprise for a distinguished surgeon to take up, that ponderous quarterly review.'

'Not odd for Adscombe,' Paul assured him. 'It marked his return to an early love. He read that kind of thing, moral science, at Cambridge. Moral stinks, as we were pleased to call it in those days. It was there that he and I first met. I wasn't taking the same Tripos, but I did, for the entertainment of my soul, attend some of the same lectures. We were both enormously attracted by the luminous unearthly discourses of McAnterly. McAnterly, you'll remember, was pretty well committed to a species of transcendental idealism, though as a conscientious instructor of youth he expounded the alternative doctrines with almost equal relish. Well, Dick Adscombe and I, in our first year, swallowed idealism whole. We didn't stop at that, of course. We tried everything once, even including dialectical materialism. We had glorious sessions together, in my rooms

and his, arguing the universe out of existence and back again. But monism was in our blood. McAnterly in his lectures argued so persuasively for the relative unreality of everything but mind that the notion of any independent material existence seemed to us merely laughable. And laugh we did. I suppose we were solemn young men; yet every now and again one of us, generally Adscombe, would crack a high-class philosophical joke, and we would kick up our heels and roar with laughter at ourselves. We read Plato together, and Plotinus—the “flight of the Alone to the Alone” we found stupendously exhilarating, especially when we enjoyed it together. We wrestled with the Germans. We thought Hegel—for a time—marvellous, and took for our theme-song the famous pronouncement that being and not-being are identical. It became a sort of password with us. Then we found Hegel out. We found everybody out. One day Dick said to me: “Paul, I’ve made a discovery. It came to me in the night. ‘Plato’s a fraud. ‘Aristotle’s an ass. Hegel’s a mere logic-monger. Kant had one idea which he rode to death. Ditto the dear Bishop. Descartes? Yes, he had a glimmering. But even Descartes didn’t get there. We’ve got to start again, my boy, you and I, at the very beginning.” We laughed and disputed, taking his points one by one, and before we parted—in the small hours of the morning—we had satisfied ourselves that he was right. So there it was. The accumulated wisdom of the ages was simply a heap of rubble, for us to sweep away. The Problem of Being remained unsolved, and it was for us to solve it. We saw the comedy of the situation; we would have been ready to agree that we were a pair of young donkeys; but in our secret hearts we didn’t seriously doubt our capacity for the job. Where Aristotle and the rest had failed, we would succeed. That was our duty and our destiny, and we embraced it resolutely.’ Franzy smiled, deprecating his own enthusiasm. ‘It was the greatest fun, I assure you.’

Contemplating the picture of a golden age which Franzy's recital had evoked, Heywood wavered for a moment in his resolve to pry further. He had already elicited both more and less than he had bargained for, and the more this shadowy Richard Adscombe took shape and came to life in his fancy, the more odious did it seem that he Heywood should be nosing his way into the man's innermost matrimonial secrets. Already he began to feel that he knew him personally and owed it to him to respect his privacies. But—"he was a cheat" Olive Shenley had declared. And he, being dead, yet spoke; his word, his authority, survived him, in an edict which seemed, upon the surface, to have been inspired by something decidedly other than the magnanimity claimed for him. Here was the mystery, and this ingenious fellow Paul Franzy, with his conspicuous talent for irrelevance, was somehow, it seemed, at the bottom of it. Why did Adscombe cut you dead in the billiard-room, my friend?

Instead of asking the question, Heywood said: "Tremendous fun. One can see that. But where did medicine and surgery come in? Was that an afterthought?"

"Ah," said Paul Franzy, "that was so like Dick! He was a great one for making discoveries, coming to new conclusions. Though he never changed his mind frivolously, as the clever young are so apt to do, once he did change it there'd be no holding him. He had the disconcerting habit of *acting* on his ideas, and in the middle of our third academic year he suddenly decided that to be an abstract philosopher was not enough. Just as he had "seen through" Plato and Aristotle and the rest, so now he saw through the whole metaphysical outfit. Thinking is a form of action, yes, said he; but a man should qualify himself for other things than thinking, or he becomes a freak, a monster, a perambulating brain. One must acquire, said 'Richard, a skill, a craft, even—if I would excuse the vulgarity—a means of livelihood. One must make a contribution to society in terms of simple usefulness. And so, having sat for his

Tripes, he embarked on an entirely new course of study, quite unrelated to what had gone before.'

'Having in the background, no doubt,' Pointing interpolated, 'a wealthy father who was willing to finance his whims.'

'His father, as it happened, had just died. Dick inherited a few thousand pounds. Not a fortune, but enough to see him through his training.'

Franzy offered this last piece of information in a tone of cool indifference. It was as though he had suddenly lost interest in the subject and were already thinking of something else. Heywood, his mind warm with scandalous conjecture, decided that both the indifference and the former enthusiasm must have been assumed for the occasion. He admired what he conceived to be the skill with which this so innocent-seeming Paul Franzy had headed him off from dangerous ground. He had talked his way round that delicate situation, missing it by miles; and one was no nearer knowing the rights and wrongs of Adscombe's attitude to Olive Shenley than when the conversation had opened.

'And I take it,' Pointing remarked, 'that he pursued his science as ferociously as he had pursued his philosophy.'

Franzy agreed. 'As ferociously, and even more faithfully, I suppose one might say—since I gather he stood pretty high in his profession?'

'Very high,' said Pointing.

'That would account, I imagine, for his late marriage?' Once again Heywood baited his line. 'I mean his incapacity to attend to more than one thing at a time.'

Franzy laughed, somewhat curtly. 'Incapacity? That's ridiculous, if I may say so. He was singleminded if you like, but not one-idea'd. After all, it was precisely because he rejected a narrow specialization, insisted on being a good all-round human person, that he did what he did and became what he became. In point of fact he was one of the most versatile of men. A first-rate editor, a man of letters in

some degree—he was a master of lucid exposition—and all this on the side, so to speak, all this in addition to following a very exacting full-time profession. Incapacity seems somehow not quite the right word, Heywood.'

Evidently, Heywood said to himself, our deceased friend was a pattern of all the virtues. But he did marry late, for all that. He did marry a girl half his age: that's a matter of simple arithmetic. And he did, after a life-long friendship, conceive a sudden violent distaste for the company of Paul Franzy. Why?

VII

DEAR Mr Heywood: You will perhaps be surprised to hear from me, and perhaps I shall be surprised myself before I have finished this letter, for it promises to be a long one. During these last weeks I've given a great deal of thought to what you said to me at Conington, and a great deal of prayer too, which I daresay you will think very oldfashioned. But never mind. We all have our own ways of seeing things and must learn to respect the views of others even when we don't understand them. I'm sure I always try to do that, and I know that many of the most *modern* people, like yourself, are good Christians at heart without knowing it. There is a saying of Pascal's which my dear brother was fond of quoting. *Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.* I'm not sure that I have the wording exact. It is not always easy to talk about such things face to face, which is why I am resorting to pen and ink. Yes, Mr Heywood, the heart has its reasons, and I hope you will not think it impertinent in me if I say that I know, in spite of our little disagreement, that *your* heart is 'in the right place'. That was revealed to me in a flash by your 'parting shot', when you said, with great firmness and frankness, that you owed loyalty neither to me nor to another but to Stuart himself. Believe me, I *do* appreciate that, and I value it too, because it does provide a sure basis for our working together for the child's good. Your questions, so searching and unexpected, were in the nature of a challenge and took me a little by surprise. That must be my excuse for having dealt with them in what I am afraid may have seemed to you a somewhat peremptory fashion. I do not deny that I was nettled for the moment at having my careful plans for the dear child's welfare called in question, especially as all my decisions,

and this one above all, have been taken in the light of always asking myself 'What would Richard do?' But I hope I am not too old to learn—even from younger people, with less experience of life than myself—nor too vain to admit a mistake when I make one. I *did* make a mistake, I now feel, in 'putting you off', that is, in hesitating to take you fully into my confidence. There *must* be perfect confidence between two persons who together undertake the guidance of a precious young life, and I think I owe it to you to tell you a little more about Richard and his ill-starred marriage than you could possibly know from any other source.

First I must make it clear that there was a more than common bond between Richard and myself. We lost our mother when he was twelve, and I only three years older. It was a terrible blow to us all, the more so because she died in very tragic and painful circumstances, which I needn't go into. Our father, it is not too much to say, was self-centred in his grief and distress and left his children to fend for themselves. I mean of course in a spiritual sense, for needless to say we lacked no material comfort proper to our age and station. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, and I hope I have long ago forgiven him. According to his lights he was a just man and a good man, but I do not think he understood the needs of children, and so it fell to me to be, in a sense, both mother and father to my darling Richard. During the school holidays we were inseparable companions, with no secrets from each other and hardly a thought that we did not gladly share. He had already been three years at a preparatory boarding school when the blow fell, and it was an agony for us both when a new term came round. I was perhaps rather older than my years in those days, the sudden responsibility made almost a woman of me while still in my teens, and I knew, forgive me if I am too frank, I knew more than most well-bred girls of that 'period' about the special temptations that lie in wait for growing boys. Even now, after so many many years have rolled

away, it is a comfort to me to know that I was able, with God's help, to guide my young brother past some dangerous places. He was a generous impulsive boy, always thinking the best of everyone, and almost *too* ready, as boys are so apt to be, to respond to advances from strangers, especially when a pretty face was in question. Sometimes there were small misunderstandings, sometimes he rebelled a little against my guidance, but we always 'made it up' after a good long talk and were more to each other than ever, and he lived to thank me—not that I wished for thanks—for what must sometimes have seemed like 'interference'. And so, thank God, he reached manhood without disaster.

I see I am making too long a story of this, but my pen runs on while I think myself back into those halcyon days. I always had great hopes of him, but even *I* did not quite realize how much he had in him—the wonderful talents, the capacity for hard work. By the time he reached school-leaving age our respective positions were reversed. I was still able to keep a sisterly watch over him, anticipate his wants and make our home a real home for him; but in other ways he very soon became the teacher and I the disciple. To say that he soon outstripped me intellectually would sound pretentious, in view of what the world now knows of him, his professional distinction, his wonderful mind so deep and clear, because I have always been a very simple, ordinary, unclever person, with no ambition but to be useful and contribute my little mite to the sum total of human happiness. Richard always came *first* with me—my chief and only joy was to help him and share his thoughts. It would not be too much to say that he *educated* me in later years, opened for me a new world of thought and culture, a world in which he moved freely, as one born to it. We live and learn, Mr Heywood, and I see now that there was a danger at one time that I might stand in his way by seeming to levy a claim on him, by being too greedy for a response to my affection. Indeed that was brought home to me

quite early, when after taking his degree at the University he suddenly announced his decision to study medicine. That meant years more of study and separation. I see now how wrong I was, but at the time it was a great shock to me. I had not looked a long way ahead, but I suppose I already felt, or perhaps had unconsciously assumed, that we were destined to live a life of usefulness together, and now, that seemed indefinitely postponed. I say it was a shock, but the greater shock was in realizing that there was a taint of *selfishness* in my attitude. That indeed was a sharp lesson to me, and I thank God it came when it did, in time to enable me to put self aside and rejoice with him in his new prospects, whatever they might hold of pain for myself. I faced then, once and for all, the possibility of his one day marrying and becoming a father. And why not? The moment I thought of them, his children were already, in imagination, very dear to me. But—perhaps it was some kind of premonition, a case of ‘coming events casting their shadow’—I *did* find difficulty in conceiving how a woman could be found who should be worthy of being their mother. You will smile at my partiality, but did not the sequel prove me right? I thought of Richard then, and I think of him now, as a rare and dedicated spirit, for whom marriage must at best be something of an irrelevance, if nothing worse. We know now how much worse it was.

But there again my pen runs away with me, because of course that is just what you *don't* know. You have seen Olive Shenley, but I fancy you did not know my brother, and you are therefore hardly in a position to judge how inevitable it was that such an association should lead to disaster. For twenty-six and a half years, not including the time between our mother's death and our father's, Richard and I shared a home. I kept house for him, entertained his friends, watched over his every interest, and I think I may say stood between him and that ‘world’ which is ‘too much with us’. And I must, in all justice, acquit myself of any

selfish motive, unless the joy of serving a beloved brother is to be accounted selfish. He spent a good deal of his leisure time at his club, and I encouraged him to do so, thinking it was good for him, and necessary, and natural, to get away sometimes from my very ordinary uninspiring society and mix with men. I was well content to remain in the background and leave him to his own devices. Among the many ways I was privileged to be of use to him was in a secretarial capacity at the office of his Review. But he persuaded me to give that up, saying that in addition to my numerous household cares it was too much for me. I still kept his appointments book at home, and wrote some of his letters for him, but I consented to relinquish the Review work. That, as it turned out, was a fatal mistake. We both paid dearly for it. The new secretary—you will have guessed her name—did not come to him through the customary safe channels of advertisement, but was sent with a recommendation by some acquaintance of his, who perhaps, though I don't wish to speak harshly where there is no proof, had his own reasons for wishing to find employment for her. But it is easy to be 'wise after the event'. At the time I thought no harm of her, not even when, some five or six months later, Richard extended her secretarial duties to include his professional correspondence. Not till she moved to new lodgings nearby, and was engaged as *personal* secretary, did I become seriously uneasy.

I blame myself for that blindness. Looking back it seems to me incredible. Yet to suppose that my bachelor brother at the age of fifty could contemplate marriage, and secretly, and with an immature young person, a mere child in intellect though not I fear in cunning, would have argued a singularly suspicious nature, which I hope I have never had. When he broke to me the news of his betrothal I was at first too much astonished to speak. There had been no warning, which amounts to saying that there had been a degree of secretiveness that amounted to deception. Do you blame

me if I felt a little hurt at having been excluded from the confidence of one to whom I had devoted the best years of my life? I saw at once that to oppose the match would be the height of unwisdom. I had presence of mind enough for that. I could hardly believe him serious. I hoped and believed that the thing would prove to be a passing fancy, and I went out of my way to be kind to her, kind and sympathetic to them both. In those days, to all appearances, she was a shy, gentle, appealing little thing. That was how she chose to appear. She professed herself grateful to me, and when I spoke of finding another home for myself she joined Richard in scouting the idea. I could not deny that my experience would be useful to a young undomesticated wife, but I did insist that I must have my own separate apartment of the house, and 'leave you young people to yourselves'. An unkind choice of words, you will think, and from me who thought of nothing but my Richard's happiness! But remember, the poor boy was in a state of infatuation, and it was my duty to save him if I could. Like Hamlet I was 'cruel only to be kind'. For I knew, I knew, that if he married her she would break his heart. Marry her he did, within three weeks, and all that I foresaw came true. Not all at once. He lived for a while in his romantic dream, and the birth of his son was a great happiness to us both. But she, she became fretful and discontented. Careful as I was not to interfere, yet ready always to give help when asked, I was conscious that she resented me, resented my affection for Richard and little Stuart's fondness for his auntie. It was all very natural and distressing. Jealousy is a sorry affliction, and believe me, Mr. Heywood, I felt for her, and was not unkind. If jealousy had been all, the situation could have been saved. I would have stood aside, I was ready to do so. I would cheerfully, yes gladly, have gone away if by going I could have ensured Richard's happiness. But that *wasn't* all. Things began to happen which even now I cannot bring myself to recount

to you, except in general terms. Perhaps a hint will be enough—you will remember what I said. Two correspondents, Mr Heywood, and she married neither of them. And he was at death's door. Forgive an inordinately long letter. I do not know why I have told you so much, but I wanted you to understand, and I am sure you will. Sincerely yours, Julia Adcombe.

VIII

YES indeed, I understand. All too well. For Miss Adscombe, Heywood said to himself, co-respondent is a label of infamy, not a mere legal term; and to ask whether a person so cited is innocent or guilty of the offence would seem to her the merest trifling. Two co-respondents. Who were they? Paul Franzy of course, but who else? Heywood decided that his next step, if a next step was to be taken at all, must be to look up the records, though he doubted whether they would throw much light on the main problem, the point from which this investigation had started, which was, whether Olive Shenley's conduct had been so outrageous as to deprive her of the moral right to see her child from time to time. It seemed unlikely that a mere law report would furnish conclusive evidence on that point, for though Heywood had a wholesome respect for English legal process he did not regard it as a way of arriving at the ultimate truth about human behaviour: there were imponderables which it did not, could not, take into account. He was on his guard, too, against too easily accepting the conclusions to which Aunt Julia's letter seemed to point, that Olive Shenley had had a raw deal and that the sooner Stuart could be got out of his aunt's kindly clutches the better. The very ingenuousness of the letter, or what seemed so, made him wary.

The first thing to do now was to look up the case in legal records. But how and where? Newspaper files? That would mean spending hours in the British Museum reading room. There must surely be a shorter cut than that. It was not only that he shrank from the tedious labour: he had a distaste for the whole enterprise. It seemed to him like reading somebody's private letters, and he couldn't

bring himself to do it unless it could be done quickly, as it were at a glance. For how could he face Olive Shenley again if he had been shamelessly prying into her secret past? This question floating up into consciousness betrayed to him his assumption that he would sooner or later meet her again. And several justifying arguments were at hand. It's a small world. Stuart Adscombe was her son. She was not the kind of woman to yield her point without a fight. Moreover he was by no means sure that it was not his duty to seek her out. She held at least one indispensable key to the problem, and she had, anyhow, a right to state her case. He felt he had treated her shabbily at that first interview. She had gone the wrong way to work. She had been hysterical and demanding. She had threatened tears. All of which was calculated rather to provoke than to overcome his resistance. But was that any real excuse for his too-correct behaviour, his evasion of argument, his civil offer of tea, and his secret half-ashamed relief when she refused it and 'swept out'? Mentally he put the phrase between inverted commas, quite in Miss Adscombe's manner, but the endeavour to see comedy in Olive's abrupt departure did not appease him now. For it was undeniable, however irrelevant to the main issue, that nothing she did was without its own curious and subtle grace.

His fumbling thoughts suddenly produced for him, like a rabbit from a conjurer's hat, Bruce Tollington, a fellow-undergraduate unnumbered years ago and now a man of law with chambers in the Temple. He was not, unfortunately, a member of the Club; and Heywood was hardly sure that his long but unintimate acquaintance with him was such as to justify what he had in mind to do. But Bruce had always been a genial fellow, and overriding his scruples about wasting a busy man's time Heywood went to the writing-room hot-foot and possessed himself of a piece of club notepaper. Dear Tollington, Forgive me bothering you with what is

only a half-personal matter, but I wonder if you can put me in the way of getting some information I need. What I want to know . . . Marking the letter private and confidential he dropped it, with a sense of work well done, in the club letter-box which stood in the hall for the use of members unequal to walking ten yards down the street. It gave him satisfaction to feel that at last he had set something in train.

He sauntered towards the telephone-boxes. On a table nearby lay the two volumes of the directory. He opened one of them at random, his fingers idly turning over the pages while he tried to find a way through the shimmering confusion of his thoughts and impulses. Suddenly he shut the book with a bang and pushed it from him, but only to reach out a hand for the other volume. He stood very still, doing nothing, scarcely even thinking, waiting perhaps for a sign. But after all, he argued, there could be no harm in looking: it wouldn't commit him to anything. He opened the directory and ran his finger down endless columns of names beginning with S. And there she was: *Shenley, Olive*. It was almost too easy. Burdensome too, for the decision was still his to make.

As he stood in the telephone-box, his hand hovering over the receiver, he was lost for a moment in simple wonder, that by lifting the small black trumpet from its hook, and dialling a certain number, he could put himself within range of that warm, dark, mature, yet oddly childlike voice. It was stranger even than that. For in these last weeks Olive Shenley had become a legend to him, a mythical figure somehow more real than life. And now—if she were at home—the legend would speak to him.

The banality of that *if* made him laugh at himself. But almost at once he heard a woman's voice, which he did not recognize.

‘Mrs Shenley?’

‘Speaking. Who is that?’

She had, then, another voice for the telephone?

'Heywood here. Good evening.'

'Who?'

'Charles Heywood. Conington, you know.'

'Mr *Heywood*?'

'Yes.'

After a perceptible pause the distant voice said: 'Good evening, Mr Heywood.'

'Good evening,' said Heywood again. He saw it was going to be hard work. 'I'm in town, Mrs Shenley. And I wondered if we might have a talk.'

'Of course.'

'I don't mean now, on the phone. I wondered . . .'

He hesitated. The voice was beginning to be more like herself, but it was still neutral.

'Yes?'

'I wondered if you could perhaps come and have a meal with me one evening. Or lunch if you'd rather.'

'That is very . . . polite of you, Mr Heywood.'

Encouraged by the smile in her voice he said: 'And therefore surprising, you mean, politeness not being my strong point.'

She laughed. 'Is it about Stuart?'

Was it? he wondered. It should be. 'In a way, yes.'

'Evening would be more convenient,' she said. 'I do a job all day.'

'Then is it a date?'

'Well . . .' There was a hint of amusement in her voice. 'It *will* be, if you'll say when and where.'

He suggested a time and a place, not without surprise that he had them ready.

'That will do very nicely,' she said.

'Splendid!'

'And, Mr Heywood!'

'Yes?'

'Although we're at war I think perhaps I ought to say

thank you when invited to dinner. It's one of the rules of polite society.'

'We don't go in for rules much at Conington,' said Heywood. 'And as for being at war . . .'

There was a click in the telephone. She had rung off.

IX

HE reached the appointed place ten minutes early. Olive Shenley was five minutes late.

‘Have I kept you waiting?’

‘Not at all. You’re wonderfully punctual.’ With a hand lightly touching her elbow he guided her in the desired direction. ‘Our table’s over there, in the corner.’

There were some hours of daylight left, but not much of it penetrated into the gilt and plush interior of this Grill Room. An orange-shaded table-lamp shed colour and a suggestion of enchantment on the white cloth, the silver and the cutlery. It was the only illuminated table in the room, no other diners having yet arrived. As soon as Heywood and his guest had settled into their seats, a waiter came hovering.

He presented the bill of fare with a ceremonial flourish. ‘M’sieur! Madame!’

‘What shall we drink,’ said Heywood, ‘while we’re grappling with this document?’

The waiter began reciting his cocktails.

Heywood was glad of the distraction. It gave him a chance to get used to being with this young woman, of whom, because his intentions were more inquisitorial than honourable, he found himself unexpectedly shy. She was subtly different from his memory of her. Younger, more aloof, serene in self-possession where formerly she had been excited and emotional. No longer a piece of agitated motherhood, but a person in her own right. Indeed one could conveniently forget, if one chose, that one stood to her in the relation of headmaster to parent. Sipping his cocktail, while conferring with her over the bill of fare, Heywood felt exultantly that he was putting up an excellent impersonation of a man completely at his ease.

The preliminaries over, the dinner ordered, the soup served, he had a moment of disquiet, wondering how and where to begin the investigation. He felt uncomfortably like a plain-clothes policeman. It made the position somehow worse that Olive was behaving beautifully. Her ease of manner, her unemphatic friendliness, seemed a little too good to be true. He hardly expected civilization in a parent, and especially this parent.

'So you have a job?' he said, at a venture. 'I didn't realize that.'

'Yes.'

'An arduous one?'

She smiled faintly. 'Interior design. I don't know if you call that arduous.'

He laughed. 'I should call it fascinating. I wonder what you think of this place, as an expert?' He waved a hand towards the decorated walls, the heavy chandeliers, the half-panelling, the red-plush seats. The total effect, for him, was one of old-fashioned and half-faded opulence, the charm being in the fading.

'I don't have to think of it, do I,' she said. 'I mean, from a professional point of view. It's very cosy and . . . reassuring.'

'Well, that's something, isn't it.'

'It's a great deal,' said Olive. 'The first time we met,' she went on, 'you had me at a disadvantage.'

'I'm not so sure,' said Heywood. He was confident again. So she was, after all, going to make things easy for him? 'I think you had *me* at a disadvantage.'

'I was shattered by the disappointment. And angry. And therefore, I suppose, not altogether reasonable.'

'And I,' said Heywood, 'since we're saying our pieces, I was forced to exhibit myself in an odious light.'

'Does that mean that you now agree with me—about Stuart?' she said quickly.

'My dear Mrs Shenley! What a question!' Heywood

forced a grin. 'I see I shall have to be careful what I say.'

He meant it, yet the speech had a kind of falseness and he wished it unspoken. It was itself careful, and self-conscious too, and careful was just what he wanted not to be. Her presence affected him strangely, and in a way that would have perplexed him had he been able to spare thought for it. He was both enlivened and soothed by it, disturbed and set at rest, the two sensations existing not (as it seemed) successively, nor side by side in logical contradiction, but together, mingling, made one. If she and her effect constituted a problem, it was a problem that her presence dissolved. There was a stillness and a radiance in her, a still radiance: not in her looks, her words, her gestures, nor in the sum of these things, but in something, herself, of which these were the physical accidents. It was not that he was in love: indeed he was consciously on guard against that folly. He was no longer conscious of her appearance as a separable part of her effect: he was conscious only of her, an embodied spirit, and suffered the illusion of nearing that mystery, while knowing little or nothing of her mind. Mystery she was, but not, in the coarser sense, a problem, not a problem to be solved by ratiocination. As for that other problem, the pretext for his present pursuit of her, that began to wear for him a shabby and trivial air. Only the need to determine his own course of action about Stuart prevented his abandoning the inquest. This probing into the past—how irrelevant and how vulgar! For a woman is what she is, not what she does or has done. But here his ardour received a check, for what Olive did or would do was obviously not quite irrelevant to the question how Stuart's interests could best be served.

So he came back full-circle, to his starting-point.

'I've thought a lot about what you told me,' he said.

'Yes!'

'What you said about your late husband,' he explained.

'You think it wasn't a very nice thing to say, I expect? Well, you're right. It wasn't.'

Heywood saw, in the unwavering look of her blue eyes, that he was not to interpret these words as a withdrawal of the accusation.

'It's not the form of words that worries me,' he said mildly, 'nor whether or not it was a "nice thing to say". It's simply that it doesn't square with what I'm beginning to learn about him.'

'Does that mean that you have been asking questions?'

'Very discreetly, I assure you. They all give him an excellent character,' he said smiling, trying to give the phrase a humorous air.

'Who does? Julia, I suppose. She wasn't married to him.'

'True. She wasn't. But wasn't he in a sense married to *her*? And wasn't that the main trouble?'

'I wonder who told you that.'

'Miss Adscombe herself.'

Olive stared incredulously. 'And who told her?'

'Nobody. But she told me.'

'Without knowing it herself?'

'Miss Adscombe,' said Heywood, 'is a very remarkable woman. It's impossible to say what she knows and what she doesn't know, about herself and about her brother I mean. I fancy she's capable of doing the most questionable things from what would seem to her the very loftiest motives. She was the most conscientious of spiders, and he the unwariest of flies. Isn't that so?'

He had said more than he intended, but now began to think that what he had said was calculated to disarm her suspicion of him.

'Are you spinning a web for *me*, Mr Heywood?'

'I hope not.' He positively felt himself blushing. 'Oh hell,' he exclaimed, 'we shall never get anywhere like this! For God's sake get it into your head, Mrs Shenley, that I'm

neither an enemy nor a Paul Pry. I'm not plotting against you, or trying to catch you out. I'm trying to get at the truth of the thing for Stuart's sake, and yours too, if you'll only believe me. What I've been saying, in my clumsy roundabout way, is that I think you had excessively bad luck in your marriage. It must be intolerable for you to have a stranger discussing your private affairs, but since we're at it let me say this. My guess—it's nothing more—is that Julia Adcombe managed to keep her brother unmarried for the best part of his life, and then, when he innocently outwitted her, she contrived consciously or unconsciously to bring his marriage to ruin. Am I right?

His violence, his apparent anger, seemed to surprise but not displease her.

'I think perhaps you are. But if you think that, why do you quote Julia as an authority on Richard's character? Not that I want to blacken his character. He was full of virtue. One of the very kindest of men.' She saw Heywood's surprise. 'Yes, I could tell you more of his goodness than anybody else in the world. Because after all I *was* in love with him and I did marry him.'

'Yes.'

'But it wasn't virtuous, and it wasn't kind, to take Stuart from me, was it?'

'If you had divorced Richard, instead of the other way about, that couldn't have happened, could it?'

'But I couldn't. There was no cause.'

'These things are sometimes arranged,' said Heywood. 'Very reprehensible, no doubt. But they are.'

'You could hardly expect poor Richard to arrange to ruin himself—professionally I mean. I wouldn't have agreed to that, anyhow.'

Heywood smiled. 'Ruin's a strong word. So that plan was never even considered?'

'It didn't have to be.'

'No?'

'No.' She became pensive, listless. Despite the pleasure he found in her company the thought occurred to him that perhaps she was playing for time. 'It was simpler than that,' she said. 'And—and not so simple.'

He waited. But she said no more.

'I take it you fell *out* of love?' he said presently, trying to soften the impudence of the question by adopting an airy, disinterested manner.

'Does that matter?' she said. 'You're concerned with what I did, aren't you? Not with my feelings.'

He appreciated the rebuke and acknowledged its justice. Yet as a statement it was the reverse of the truth. Officially he was concerned with the mere 'facts of the case', but in his heart he cared nothing for such things but only for the feelings of which they might, for all he knew, be merely the distorted and misleading expression. A woman might be driven by circumstances to all manner of desperate shifts and follies: that did not affect what she was in herself, in the innermost secret reality of her being. But who the devil am I, he impatiently demanded, that I should be admitted to that sanctuary? And the further thought came, like a stealthy half-heard whisper: And if I were, what then?

'And what I did,' she said, 'that at least is simple enough.'

'Is it?'

'I ran away.'

'I see. Without warning, or discussion of any kind, you ran away. Is that it?'

'Not quite without warning.'

'Ah! And presumably not alone?'

'Not alone?'

'I mean you went away *with* someone?'

'Or *to* someone?' she suggested, smiling. 'That's another possibility, don't you think?'

'With or to someone with whom you expected to be happier than with Richard Adscombe,' said Heywood gently.

'Do we have to go through the whole court proceedings,

Mr Heywood? I went away, and the necessary evidence was supplied. Isn't that enough?'

'Not enough to account for your husband's "cheating", as you called it,' said Heywood quickly. 'Did you go to . . . Mr Shenley?'

'I could hardly do that,' said Olive.

'No? Why?'

'He was dead.'

'He was dead!'

'He had been dead for ten years.'

'I see,' said Heywood blandly. 'Your second husband had been dead for ten years. That must have been about five years before you married your first husband. You make everything wonderfully clear.'

'Not my husband. My father. Poor Mr Heywood! What a shame! After the divorce I reverted to my maiden name.'

'And have never re-married?' he said eagerly.

'Did you really think I was married?'

The question had point. For had he not looked her up in the telephone-book and discovered no evidence of at any rate a resident husband? In fact he had until a moment ago conveniently forgotten the hypothetical Shenley, whom he had assumed to be existing somewhere in the remote background, an absentee spouse. Was she then alone in the world? Not that it made any practical difference, unless to make her a fraction more dangerous.

'But you call yourself *Mrs* Shenley?' he said, thinking aloud.

'Having a son, I find it more convenient.'

'But isn't it just the point,' he objected, 'that you haven't a son? I mean, haven't him with you.'

'True, I haven't,' she said, 'at the moment.'

'But you think you will have,' he persisted., 'Is that what you imply?'

She smiled, but did not answer.

Provoked by her serene evasiveness, and feeling that he had unaccountably lost command of the situation, he said with careful deliberation:

‘I had another testimonial to your husband’s character. Can you guess from whom?’

She shook her head. ‘Have you made a house-to-house canvass? How industrious of you!’

‘It was an old friend of his, and of yours too, I fancy.’

‘Yes?’

‘You do know Paul Franzy, don’t you?’

Her eyes regarded him steadily. A little too steadily, he decided.

‘Paul? Of course. Well, what did Paul say of him?’

‘A saint, he said. The soul of charity. The most magnanimous human being he’d ever known. That’s quite a lot, isn’t it?’

Olive agreed. The ease of her manner was no longer quite effortless, but her beautiful blue eyes seemed to hold nothing but candour.

‘It *is* saying a lot,’ she said. ‘Still, Paul ought to know.’

X

SHE offered no further remarks about Paul Franzy. And Heywood felt he could not pursue that point: he had already, he thought, gone far enough to get himself disliked, and to be disliked would not advance the inquiry. But the dinner was a good one, the service discreet, the wine beneficent; and as the evening warmed up he found it easy to drop the inquisitor and resume the host. In the warm climate of her presence he did for a while altogether forget the private excuse he had made to himself for seeking her out; and when ultimately he recalled it, that ostensible praiseworthy motive, it seemed not merely unimportant but irrelevant. And as Heywood forgot it, so, apparently, did Olive. The hint of aloofness in her, the suspicious defensive irony, vanished away; and he awoke with a curiously deep pleasure to the realization that she was now talking easily, as one old friend to another, and lapsing as easily into a thoughtful, comfortable silence. At times it was as though she were thinking aloud.

Olive, like Richard, had been left motherless in her childhood. Unlike Richard she became powerfully attached to her father, having almost no one else in the world. But though childhood had been for her a more than usually solitary experience, for she was an only child and had the only child's capacity for being alone even in the company of other children, it was the moments of delight that she remembered best. She lived with her father in a small country town, over the bank of which he was manager, cashier, and half the staff. Every shop and every shopkeeper being well known to her, the town was in effect an extension of home, and she felt at least safe in it. Safe and yet somehow a stranger, for one of the fantasies that nourished her imagina-

tion was of having lived before, far away and long ago. She did not in any literal sense believe this, yet it was something a little more substantial, more persistent, more persuasive and taken for granted, than a game of pretence; and it was one of the few notions which she never confided even to her father. At week-ends, when the weather made it possible, she and her father would go exploring, as he indulgently called it. Sometimes these explorations took the form of long walks into the surrounding country, or slow meandering train-journeys on a single-track branch line, through green or wooded fields, and chalk-cuttings, and beside running streams, in and out of tiny rural railway stations strung like beads on the thread of their journeying. But these were exceptional times: more often they contented themselves, more than contented Olive, with the heath and the lake that lay within half a mile of their house door. Olive's father was a great builder of little ships, and these, in which the fancy alone travelled, gave her the best explorations of all. The lake was wide and beautiful; large white birds visited its sandy beaches; beyond the scrub that environed it were scattered pines and birches; and beyond the trees a limitless, ever-changing sky. Her father was no sailor. With mansize craft he had had no experience, and apparently no wish for it, unless this hobby of his was the sublimation of a wish which it would have been merely hopeless to pursue. The most he could manage in that line was to take a rowing boat as far as the little green island when one of his toy ships got stranded there; and that kind of incident led to a further delight, for one day it occurred to them to take with them a paper twist of brown sugar, some broken biscuits, and a medicine bottle containing ginger beer, and—between lunch and late tea on a Saturday afternoon—spend dangerous days and nights as castaways on that desert island. Sailor or not, there seemed to be nothing he didn't know about the building and handling of model ships, which was the mainstay of their weekly pleasure. Particular

moments lived in Olive's memory, though moments she could not exactly place. The gallant yacht, listing at an alarming angle, sailed out in a wide curve across the lake, across the vast uncharted sea. Sunlight broke suddenly out of a drifting raincloud, and all the magic argosies of romance were symbolized for her in a distant glittering sail.

'Once, we gathered sticks and made a fire on the island,' she said to Heywood.

'Did you? More than once, I expect.'

'Yes, there were other times, but I remember them as once, if you know what I mean. Or perhaps it's one particular time that I remember. Do you think memory arranges things?'

'Surely,' Heywood said.

'And falsifies them in the process?'

'That's another story. We should hate to believe that.' She nodded. 'The truth is often hateful.'

'Anyhow, what *is* the process? It's only selection after all. There's some faculty in us, I don't mean a conscious thing, that picks out and keeps what we want of our past experience, and lets the rest go.'

'But does it go? Isn't it always there, stored away in the lumber room?'

'Leaves the rest out of sight then,' Heywood amended. 'Forgetting, when you come to think of it, is almost as necessary as memory. Forgetting what is not to our purpose is as important as remembering what is. In fact, the one is a precondition of the other, I should say. If we remembered the whole of our past, all the time, we should never be able to cope with the present.'

'That *would* be a pity, wouldn't it?' said Olive dryly. 'But doesn't one of the standard philosophers'—she put the phrase between ironical quotation marks—'say that even direct experience, let alone memory, is only a selection from reality, made by one's mind for its own purposes?'

'I fancy several of them say that. And it's obviously

true in a physical sense. We get only what our sense-instruments are designed to receive.'

'So when we remember,' said Olive, 'we're at two removes from reality. Is that it? We're merely selecting from a selection?'

'That's their story, I suppose,' Heywood agreed. 'Did you, by the way, discuss this kind of thing with Adscombe?'

'We discussed everything,' she said, 'almost.'

'Except, perhaps, his sister,' Heywood suggested.

She ignored that, as though her thoughts were on other things. 'That was the beauty of it, and the comfort. In the office, long before there was any thought of an engagement or marriage. He got so used to me that he would say anything that came into his head. It was quite impersonal, or seemed so at first. He would just talk out his thoughts to me, whatever happened to be interesting him at the moment. And he told me, almost without knowing it, a great deal about himself.'

'So it was a marriage of true minds?' said Heywood.

'That sounds a little chilly.' She smiled what he privately called her Chinese smile. 'If you're thinking I wasn't really in love with Richard, you're wrong.'

'Not at all. I was only thinking——'

'You were thinking,' she interposed, 'that he was so much older than I. And I don't suppose I can hope to make you understand how little that mattered. Because, you see, he was really exceptionally young. Not merely in looks but in—other ways. It's difficult to explain. In some ways he was like a boy, a boy with a man's mind. I suppose it sounds absurd, but he had a boy's innocence and eagerness. All the same, he did rather worry about his years.'

'That would be *after* the question of marriage had arisen,' Heywood suggested. 'Or at any rate after it had arisen in his . . . heart, shall we say? I mean, it was the disparity

between your two ages, wasn't it, that made him worry about his?'

'No,' she said, 'I think not. That may have made it worse, but it didn't start it. He had a disposition that way. He was haunted by a sense of time lost.'

Heywood smiled wryly. 'Who isn't, after forty?'

'*You* aren't, for one,' said Olive. 'Not as Richard was. It was odd in so distinguished a person. He was admired and looked up to. He'd been a brilliant success in everything he tried.'

'But there were things he hadn't tried. Such as being a husband and a father.'

'But, surely,' she protested, 'that's altogether too simple an explanation! He could have married if he'd wanted to, Julia or no Julia. If he had really set his heart on it she couldn't have prevented him. How could she? After all, she didn't in the end succeed in preventing him, though I'm sure she did her best to! This feeling of his wasn't a surface thing, a mere fancy. It was deep-rooted. It came up from the unconscious. All his grown-up life, for as long as he could remember, he'd had a recurring dream. Not the *same* dream, but the same in general outline. He would be back at his preparatory school. Sometimes it was a classroom, sometimes a playing field, sometimes the school chapel. But always he was surrounded by boys, boys of ten or twelve, and always before long, the feeling would steal over him that he had been there at the school for years past his time. He was a man among boys, still trying to learn, trying to catch up. And now he was forty, or forty-five, or fifty, or whatever it might be, and he never *would* catch up. And he used, to wake, he told me, with a sense of the most cruel desolation and despair, feeling that he'd missed something, missed everything—as though all the years of his life had gone by in a flash.'

'Those were his own words?'

'Yes. He used to ask me what I thought it could mean.'

As if I could know! He pretended to make light of it, but secretly it troubled him, I'm sure. It was significant that I was the only person he ever mentioned it to.'

'Never to Julia?'

'Never. That was strange too, seeing how close they were to each other.'

'Did you venture to breathe the word psycho-analysis to him?'

'Well, yes, I did. And "breathe" is right too. How clever of you!'

'Not very, I think. Freudery was all the rage in those days. And my guess is he had less than no use for it.'

'You're right again.'

'He probably said he didn't propose to spend a hundred guineas in order to be told he had a secret passion for his great-grandmother.'

Olive laughed. 'Something like that.'

'And one sees his point,' Heywood conceded. 'Especially as by that time he was beginning to realize he was in love with you.'

It had all happened not less than ten years ago. Heywood tried to imagine an Olive ten years younger, and her effect on a man of fifty who had fallen in love with her. A man, moreover, who presumably had avoided or resisted love all his life. Was he torn to pieces, his world shattered? Was he fired and rejuvenated? Did he, with trembling rapture, find himself on the threshold of an adolescent's dream of paradise? From what Olive had said, the last seemed not unlikely; but who could tell? Not Olive, surely, even if she would. And was it a sudden or a slow process, love at first sight, the spring fashion, or the more insidious and unconscious growing into love that belongs to a man's later years? And did it break upon him out of the sky, a blinding revelation; or did he build up his notion of her, thought by thought, considering, judging, weighing chances, listing pros and cons, and being at last overborne by the accumulation of evidence

that she was indeed the desire of his heart? The more Heywood pondered the problem, the more did it seem to him a miracle that Adscombe had married at all, in the face of Julia's secret resolve that he shouldn't. That so brief, so ill-fated, breaking-away!—it argued an uncommonly powerful motive in a man who had meekly consented for thirty years to play fly to Julia's spider. Here Heywood smiled at himself, beginning to suspect that his fancies were running away with his judgment. And glancing at Olive, feeling the glow of her presence, seeing the roses-and-ivory stillness her inattention presented him with, Heywood decided that indeed there had been motive enough.

'One day,' said Olive, breaking a long silence, 'Richard told me that he had had his dream again, but with a new and complicating addition. He was rather excited about it, and puzzled . . .'

Heywood interposed a question: 'Would that be before his marriage, or after?'

'Long before. Before any such idea, I think, had entered his head.'

'In fact before you . . . fell in love with each other,' Heywood persisted.

Heywood could almost have blushed for himself, and the faint ghost of a blush that showed in Olive's face seemed as much his as hers.

'I can't answer for him. But I think I already knew how it was with me.'

'I see. Forgive my interrupting you. You were telling me of the new dream.'

'Well, the new dream ran true to form most of the way, but with variations. The school had changed to a day school. Or at any rate Richard, in his dream, had been going to it every morning, and going back home in the afternoon to Julia. Yes, to Julia.'

'A grown-up Julia,' Heywood suggested. 'Not the child she had been when he was in fact a schoolboy.'

Olive agreed. 'It was the usual mixture of past and present, and there came the usual, inevitable moment of anguish, when he realized that he was a grown-up person, not a schoolboy any more. So far, it was the same. But on the way home to Julia he remembered, that's to say he dreamt he remembered, that that school of his—it was down in Hampshire somewhere—had been closed for many years, and that the headmaster was dead. This puzzled him very much, for he had just come from the school, had just been talking with the headmaster. And then, still in his dream, still on the walk home from school, he began to consider quite rationally what could be the explanation. Had he *really*, he asked himself, been escaping day after day into an unknown dimension, slipping through into some remote little cranny of space-time? Or was he the victim of some more or less insane delusion? And in either case what in the world could Julia be thinking about it? Since she knew, as well as he did, that the school and the school-master had both ceased to exist——'

'Which in fact is true?' Heywood asked.

'Yes,' said Olive, 'and since she knew that, as well as he did, what could she imagine him to be doing, he wondered, when he set off every morning for school, as in his dream he *had* been doing for as long as he could remember?'

'And then?' said Heywood.

'That's all. No more. He wondered and wondered and—woke wondering.'

'H'm.' Heywood beckoned the waiter and ordered more coffee. 'And was the latter part of the dream accompanied by what the psychologists, in their sweet jargonizing, call emotional affect?'

'I gathered he was in quite a state about Julia.'

'His guilty conscience,' Heywood murmured.

'Do you mean Julia was that?'

Heywood shrugged his shoulders. 'Maybe. But that

doesn't tell us much, anyhow. It doesn't tell us *why*. Guilt implies sin. But what was the sin? Being rude to Nanny? Forgetting to say his prayers? Wetting his bed at four years old? One could invent half-a-dozen plausible explanations. But the truth—that's another matter.'

XI

THE home of her childhood, above the bank, had been airy and full of sunlight. Or so she remembered it. For the glowing roundness of the oil lamp at evening, when curtains were drawn across the dusky windows, was itself a kind of sun, a small domestic sun which she and her father shared. One room was given over entirely to shipbuilding and similar activities, and here she spent so much time watching him work, or maybe remembered so much of the little time she did in fact spend, that the smell of sliced timber and the crisp rustle of shavings affected her for ever afterwards like poetry. How different the house to which, after years of transition elsewhere, marriage transported her! Heywood, fitting the pieces of the story together as he got them from her, soon found it coming to life in his imagination, and so persuasively that sometimes he forgot what he had resolved to remember: that two pairs of eyes, Olive's as well as his, were involved in this seeing. In the warmth of his sympathy he did not always pause to remind himself that perhaps another's version of the same facts would have a quite different emotional colour. The house in Harpole Square that presented itself to his fancy was a composite of all houses of the kind that he had known. He saw it all: the dignified, late-Georgian façade, the grey stone, the wide sash windows, the shining brass knocker in a green-painted door. In the middle of the square was a railed garden or shrubbery, to which each householder had the right of entry. Characteristically, it was Julia who kept the key of that green patch, and with Julia that one visited it, to enjoy the pleasures of solitude. It was there that she and the young wife had their quiet womanly talks.

To a young woman beginning to believe herself in love,

and as guileless as she was intelligent and studious, the idea of entering such a household as confidential secretary to the great man must have been attractive. Nor could she have supposed there was anything to fear from the gracious elderly lady who was his sister. Some awe she may have felt, did feel (Heywood gathered), in surroundings so chaste, so correct, so evidently cultured and well-bred. But not for long; for Mr Adscombe was her friend as well as her employer, and if he was at home there, so was she, in his company. A difference there was, nevertheless, between working for him here and working *with* him in the neutral territory of the Review office. For one thing he was, ever so slightly, a different person, enclosed in an aura of professional busyness and preciseness surprisingly unlike his more easygoing, discursive, editorial self. At first she thought the difference merely reflected the difference in occupation, but gradually it dawned on her that there was another and more complex cause. Partly it was that there was no longer the agreeable sense of an exclusive comradeship, a solitude à deux. But even that was not all. There was something more positively inimical. Julia Adscombe? Yes. But not because she was a third person, and a woman, and the mistress of the house, but because, in addition to all this, she was Julia Adscombe.

Before the new arrangement was many weeks old Olive knew, or persuaded herself, that she was in danger of losing whatever she had once possessed of Adscombe, and that he was blissfully or wilfully unaware of it. Most of the Review work was now done in the house, so there was not even that much periodic release into a freer relationship. Her uneasiness grew to a point at which she thought she could bear the situation no longer. She began hinting at changes: a series of timid endeavours that curiously foreshadowed what was to happen later. But Adscombe was deaf and blind to all suggestions. Was anything wrong? he asked. She could not bring herself to admit so much. Did she find

the work too much for her? Did she need more time to herself? A higher salary? A new typewriter? But none of these things, it seemed, was what she wanted. For some days the subject was dropped. At last, in desperation which may or may not have been purely ingenuous (Heywood did get so far as to put the question to himself), she declared to Adscombe that she must leave his employment.

'But you knew, didn't you, that he wouldn't let you do that?' Heywood asked.

'I don't think I understand,' said Olive.

'You knew, didn't you, that he was in love with you?'

'How could I know? He had given no sign.'

'Well,'—Heywood smiled—'women are supposed to know such things. But please go on. He demanded your reasons, of course?'

'Yes.'

'And what did you say?'

'He seemed very much astonished and upset. Everything, he said, had gone so pleasantly. After a long awkward silence he asked if by any chance I was leaving to get married. I could see it cost him a great effort to ask that. He was painfully embarrassed and apologetic about it. I'd never seen him at such a disadvantage. It—hurt me. At that moment I'd have done anything to get back to the old easy footing.'

'Except stay on with him,' Heywood said.

'I suppose so, yes.'

'In what you felt to be a false position,' he added, helping her out. 'And so . . .?'

'He recovered himself quickly, and asked me, in a polite, rather formal way, to reconsider my decision. Next day he asked me to marry him.'

'And you did,' said Heywood. 'But not, I imagine, without a certain amount of misgiving?'

Heywood recalled to himself a sentence from Miss Adscombe's letter in which she mentioned that Olive had

joined Richard in scouting the suggestion that she, sister Julia, should find a home elsewhere and leave the newly married pair in sole possession. That seemed, now, a singularly perverse act on Olive's part; but it presently emerged, as the narrative took its winding course, that it had been done deliberately and for a reason that had seemed to her all-sufficient. Adscombe, by their mutual confession of love, was more than restored to Olive; she had him now for lover as well as friend, and the approach to a new relationship in which they would be everything to each other filled the days with an unparalleled delight and agitation. There was now nothing in the world they could not freely discuss, except one thing, one burningly significant theme. Knowing, feeling, the depth of his fraternal attachment, she still shrank from the danger of even seeming to criticize Julia. Nor was there any solid basis for criticism. Julia had always behaved to her brother's secretary with courtesy, if not with positive kindness: she had been no more distant than their disparity in age and status had seemed to warrant. Olive's distrust of her was definite enough, but its causes eluded definition, and in the new joy not merely of being betrothed to Richard, but rather of finding him so indubitably her own, she was confident of being able to cope with whatever small difficulties might arise. Intuition suggested to her, with questionable wisdom, that the ultimate intimacy of marriage would so consolidate her position with Richard that she would be more than a match for anyone who threatened it. She calculated that by failing to back up Richard's insistence on Julia's remaining in the house she would alienate some part of his affection, and without gaining her point. Moreover there were moments when she persuaded herself that once she was married Julia's presence would not be intolerable.

In that she was mistaken. So much Heywood had long ago guessed. It was clearly written in Miss Adscombe's own letter to himself. But he found it not quite easy, at

first, to determine the precise how and why of it; and whether the disaster had been inherent in the mere situation, apart from the personalities involved, or had been precipitated by one or the other; and, if so precipitated, whether accidentally or of set purpose. He forced himself to glance at the possibility that by innocent or not so innocent contrivance Olive had contributed as much to the disharmony as Julia herself.

Julia, with what looked like delicacy and good sense, had insisted on a part of the house being hers for her sole use. She conscientiously absented herself, leaving the happy pair to the enjoyment of their private paradise. She took her meals with them, however, as was only reasonable; and these incursions had the curious effect of making her withdrawals pointed and somehow embarrassing. Luncheon, especially, was a daily ordeal for Olive. She had already, for some months, joined the family at luncheon in her capacity of private secretary. Now she was Richard's wife, and nominally mistress of the house. But the difference was not visible and it was with some difficulty that she believed in it. Julia, by request, continued to instruct the cook—for why interfere with an arrangement that had run so smoothly for countless years?—and young Mrs. Adscombe had no more responsibility for what was served at table than Miss Shenley had had. There was indeed plenty to occupy her time; there was in fact precisely the work that had occupied her in this same household before marriage; and the division of labour between the two women had a specious reasonableness to recommend it. But it had the effect, for Olive, of making her marriage seem unreal. Julia did not pester her with advice; for since Olive had acquired no new responsibility, except that of being Richard's bedfellow, there was nothing, at first, on which advice could be given or received. No, she behaved, on the whole, with a rather too conspicuous tact. She was quiet and unobtrusive, and indulgent, as to a child. Then, according to Olive's story, it seemed to occur to her that it was time they got to know each other better.

Producing her key, she proposed that Olive should come into the gardens with her and have a nice talk. Olive could only agree. They had several nice talks, nearly all about Richard, though Richard was introduced into the conversation circumspectly and even now advice was not offered. Julia refrained from saying that she knew Richard better than anyone else could ever hope to know him. She did not say that Richard was her whole life and she his. What she did say was:

‘It’s something to know that one has been able to help dear Richard all these long years.’

‘You’ve been wonderful, I know,’ Olive said, placatingly.

‘Not I, my dear. But a wonderful privilege, yes. He needed me and I was there. He needed someone who could talk his own language, enter into his mind, and share the things of the spirit with him. The spirit, Olive dear. Perhaps it will surprise you to hear that Richard was a very *spiritual* man?’

‘Why should it surprise me?’ Olive asked. ‘Do you mean he has changed?’

Julia pursed her lips. ‘Just look at the laburnum. Isn’t it beautiful? I only mean, dear, that I was able to minister, in my little way, to his real, his higher nature.’

Heywood protested at that. He said it was a little too strong. But Olive stuck to her story. She could not vouch, she said, for the exact words; but that was the substance of her nice talk with Julia, or rather it was the substance and burden of the whole series of them. Perhaps the poison had been given with more finesse than she could now remember: what she did remember, with painful clarity, was its effect. Their respective roles, hers and Julia’s, had now been made clear to her. Richard, it was to be understood, was a mixture of saint and satyr. Julia was to cater for the one, and Olive for the other.

‘I was young,’ Olive explained, ‘and romantic. It made me feel like a kept woman.’

Heywood sat smouldering. 'I wonder you didn't have her thrown out,' he said.

'You don't really,' said Olive, smiling. 'You know too well that if I *could* have got rid of her there would never have been a problem at all. She was a fixture in Richard's life. That was the whole point about her.'

'But didn't you at least *tell* Richard?' he asked, in a kind of exasperation.

'I did later. Not then.'

'But why not?'

'I was afraid.'

'What of? I don't understand,' said Heywood.

But she could not or would not tell him that. He was left to his own conjectures. Perhaps shame had tied her tongue. Or perhaps, worse still, she could not quite trust Richard to repudiate Julia's hint. Here Heywood was aware of approaching forbidden territory. Olive had told him astonishingly much, in view of their short acquaintance; but he could not expect her to invite him into her husband's bedroom. What he dimly surmised was that did she do so he would find Julia even there, a ghost permeating Eden with the rancid odour of her sanctity.

XII

LATE though it was when Heywood and Olive Shenley came out of the restaurant, there was still some daylight left, and the night air had a delicious freshness. Heywood was reluctant to let the party break up, a reluctance he justified to himself with the plea that there was still much that remained to be told.

'Unless you're in a hurry to get to bed,' he remarked tentatively, 'we might perhaps walk a little way.'

'Yes,' said Olive. 'Why not? We need some fresh air after that orgy of reminiscence.'

'How would it be, then, to make for the Embankment and walk along by the river?'

She agreed. 'I see you've got it all mapped out.'

'If you get tired we can always pick up a taxi.'

'Can we?'

'Well, we can try.'

They laughed. Either alternative, the getting or the not getting of a taxi, was equally amusing to them both. Heywood was suddenly conscious of an agreeable lightness of heart and head.

'It's been a good evening,' he said. 'It was nice of you to humour my elderly whim.'

'I've enjoyed it very much,' said Olive. She sounded prim and demure and absurdly young, like a small child saying her prepared piece. 'Is it true, by the way, that the children at your school call you Charles?'

He laughed again. 'So *you* 've heard that story too! They don't, in fact. But they might at any moment. So might you, if you could bring yourself to forgive me.'

'For what?'

'For being what I am. Stuart's schoolmaster.'

She turned to him a face of amused surprise. 'Do you know, I 'd almost forgotten that!'

'Had you?'

He was not quite sure he believed her. What he did see, what was borne in upon him with alarming emphasis, was that by drifting into friendship with this young woman he had gravely prejudiced his chances of being strictly impartial in the Stuart affair. And he could not quite dismiss the suspicion that this was an effect she had calculated on. He could hardly, in fairness, think the worse of her if she had, in view of his own manœuvrings; and he was ready to appreciate the comedy of his having fallen into the pit he had dug for her. A question hovered in the hinterland of his mind which might, had he squarely faced it, have called a halt to the whole enterprise. For that very reason he avoided facing it. What, in fact, could he do about Stuart if the verdict turned out to be in Olive's favour? Could he conspire with her against the legally appointed guardian? Hardly. What then could he do but issue an ultimatum to Miss Adscombe, who would thereupon take the boy away? And whom would that benefit? Not Stuart. Not Olive. Not himself. To such considerations as these he gave the merest glance and went stubbornly on his way, resolved that nothing now should stop his getting at the truth.

The walk by the river, though in the general direction of where she lived, gave Heywood as yet no sense of diminishing the distance between now and the moment of parting. He sauntered along, hatless, at her side, glad to feel the light inshore breeze ruffle his hair and to pretend that he detected a hint of brine in its savour, brine and tarpaulin, ropes and rum, the composite essence of his book-fed notion of sea-faring. The lapping noise of the water encouraged the idle fancy, which was an echo perhaps of the romanticism Olive had confessed to, in her account of her father's yacht-sailing. He felt pleasantly at one with her in that: it was like a shared childish secret. The sun had gone down

behind the factories and warehouses lining the further shore: their chimneys stood out dramatically black and sharp against the dying fire of the sky; and the light of the new-risen moon seemed to compete with what was left of daylight. These things were more soothing to look at than the occasional solitary figure, shabby and all too probably homeless, leaning moodily on the stone coping or sitting huddled on one of the Embankment seats.

'How did it end, your marriage?' Heywood suddenly asked.

After a perceptible pause Olive said: 'Haven't you had enough of all that?'

'No. But I expect you have. Forgive me.'

'If I tell you everything tonight,' Olive said, 'we shall have nothing left.'

'Nothing left?'

'To talk about, I mean.'

He was warmed, and warned, by the implications of that.

'Look,' he said. 'Let's get this straight. I've been an awful bore, pestering you with questions. But please understand that if I go on doing it it's for a different reason . . .' He hesitated, not quite knowing how to finish.

'A different reason, you mean, from the one you started with?'

'Yes.' He warned himself that he must be careful not to say too much. 'One can't listen to such a story without becoming interested in the . . . leading characters, shall we say? And, naturally, one likes to know the end. But for heaven's sake——'

'There! There!' He saw with delight that she was laughing at him. 'Don't, please, apologize. You can't think how I've enjoyed talking about myself. It's been quite a debauch. And I quite recognize,' she added, urbanely mischievous, 'the nobility of your motive.'

'That's fine,' said Heywood.

He did not revert to the question he had asked, but presently she began answering it without further prompting. After that first grim series of afternoon sessions with Julia, she told him, her sister-in-law had granted her a respite from persecution. Persecution was Olive's own word for it, and she could not bring herself to entertain Heywood's hint that perhaps it had been no conscious design on Julia's part. Julia, she said, knew very well what she was doing. But whether Julia's better behaviour was due to her having relented, or to a fear lest she had gone too far, Olive could not say. It might be that Julia was as much afraid of Olive's influence with Richard as Olive was of hers. Anyhow, she did abate something of her malice. That too, in Olive's view, was as likely as not a piece of deliberate cunning; for had she persisted in her first course Olive would have been driven to an earlier and happier escape. As it was, the marriage went on. It went on till the coming of the child.

'And then came to an end?' said Heywood in astonishment.

'Well, not exactly.' She smiled wryly. 'But I think it was Stuart who really divorced us. And now I must tell you how, and why.'

'Not if you 'd rather not!'

'From the moment we knew I was pregnant my position grew more and more unbearable. Julia, don't you see, became full of an insulting solicitude.'

'Insulting?'

'She made me feel like a pedigree cow.'

Heywood nodded. 'I see.'

She regarded him narrowly. 'What does that mean?'

'Just that.'

'But you sound a little sceptical?'

'No,' said Heywood. 'I don't think so. It all fits into the picture. You, Julia, and Adscombe. And if you felt like that, well, that's how you felt.'

'But a sensible young woman wouldn't have done, you mean?'

'No, I don't mean that either. But look, solicitude on Julia's part was quite the civil thing, wasn't it, and quite the natural thing?'

'Yes, but——'

'And in a woman of her age and temperament it was to be expected that it would take a fussy, perhaps tiresome form?'

'And so?' said Olive.

'I haven't come to that yet. I'm just trying to see the situation as it was. On the one hand Julia, doing her act, making her solicitous fuss. On the other hand, a highly strung, sensitive girl——'

'Do you mean touchy?'

'No. A highly strung, sensitive girl, with no reason to like or trust the said Julia, newly embarked on the difficult business of maternity, and very ready to resent anything that looks like interference.'

'In fact you *do* mean touchy,' Olive said firmly.

'Touchy if you like, but with a touchiness induced by an unusual combination of circumstances, not by a natural predisposition.'

'Induced, you mean, by pregnancy. I told you once before,' she said, with smiling severity, 'that you talk like a leading article.'

'Not that alone. That's a simplification. The circumstances, if you want me to enumerate them, were pregnancy, marriage to an elderly adolescent, and the not being mistress in your husband's house. Right?'

'And as a result of all that I was unfair to Julia. Is that your theory?'

'My dear Olive,' he said, throwing himself on her mercy, 'I haven't really a theory. It's simply that I'm trying to see all round the thing. What's incontestable is that the wretched Julia got powerfully on your nerves.'

'Yes. But much more than that. I know you will think I was hysterical at the time, and you will make due allowances in your polite, exasperating way. But Julia's

behaviour, in little subtle ways, was really quite fantastic. And Richard played up to it: that was what hurt most. His attitude to her was protective and—if you can believe it—apologetic. And hers to him was tender and forgiving. You never in your life saw anything so radiantly noble as Julia in those last six months. And you never saw nobility so obtrusively unobtrusive.'

'Ah! She wore a halo, did she?'

'And a crown of thorns as well. She had made the great renunciation, don't you see?—and her reward was at hand.'

'Do I see?' said Heywood. 'I'm not quite sure I do.'

'It's really very simple,' said Olive. 'And, if you like, very silly. In the last weeks before Stuart was born it was made crystal clear to me.'

'What was?'

'By accepting me, by wrapping me up in that voracious love of hers, Julia had made her possession of Richard absolute. I was no longer a hated rival for his affection. I was merely—now how would *you* put it?—an indispensable biological convenience,' said Olive, imitating Heywood's manner. 'At first, don't you see, I had been an embarrassment, Richard's lower nature made manifest, a kind of guilty secret. But now I found myself promoted, made much of. For as a breeding machine I had my uses. I could give Julia a child.'

Heywood protested. 'You could *what*?'

'Yes,' said Olive, with a curious ironical gentleness, 'that was the point. That was what a thousand trivial indications had made clear to me. It was mad if you like, but it was true. It was true for Julia, whether she realized it or not. And as for Richard . . . well, who can say?'

'Yes, but . . . but *what* was true?'

'That the child in my womb was Julia's child,' said Olive simply.

XIII

IN the High Court of Justice, Probate Divorce and Admiralty Division, *Adscombe v. Adscombe*, before Mr Justice QUEM. The petitioner, Richard Adscombe, sought a decree of divorce against his wife Olive Latislaw Adscombe on the ground of adulteries alleged to have been committed by her with two several persons. He also asked for custody of the one child of the marriage. Mr G. W. Coker, K.C., appeared for the petitioner. The suit was undefended, but on behalf of the second co-respondent a caveat denying misconduct was entered by Mr Leonard Earp, K.C., and no evidence was offered under this head.

In reply to questions from counsel, petitioner said he married the respondent on September the 5th, seven years ago, and lived and cohabited with her at 23 Harpole Square, the address from which he carried on his profession of consultant surgeon. At the time of marriage his wife was twenty-five and he fifty-one. A photograph was handed to him, which he identified as that of his wife.

MR COKER: Were you and your wife happy together?—For a time, yes.

I see. You were happy together for a time. Can you tell his lordship for how long?—For a considerable time.

MR JUSTICE QUEM: For a year? For two years? For three years?—It's not easy to be exact, my lord. Off and on, for perhaps a year.

MR COKER: You were happy together for a year. And at the end of that time did your wife give birth to a son?—Yes.

MR JUSTICE QUEM: A moment, Mr Coker. [*to witness*] You said 'off and on'. Does that mean there were difficulties between you?—I wouldn't say difficulties. I suppose marriage is never quite plain sailing.

Quite so. Had you been married before?—No.

Was your relationship perfectly normal and satisfactory, in a physiological sense?—Yes.

MR COKER resuming examination: At something like a year after your marriage did your wife's attitude change towards you?—Yes.

Was that before or after the birth of the child?—The change was gradual. It began, I think, before my son's birth.

Will you, in your own words, tell the Court more about that?—If it is necessary. Some months before the child was born I noticed that my wife had become cold towards me. It was nothing very specific, but there was no longer the old confidence between us. She was withdrawn and preoccupied, as though retired into herself. I did not pay very much attention to it. I thought that in view of her condition something of the kind was perhaps to be expected.

As a medical man, you made every allowance for that?—Yes.

Did you afterwards take a different view?—Yes.

How was that?—During pregnancy she had every kind of care and consideration both from myself and from my sister, who shared our home. Perversely enough, she seemed actually to resent our solicitude. Moreover she seemed to regard the prospect of motherhood with cynical indifference, if not with positive aversion.

MR JUSTICE QUEM: This is a little too general, Mr Coker. What is the point of it?

MR COKER: We are coming to that, my lord.

MR JUSTICE QUEM: You're not, I take it, asking for a decree on the grounds of a wife's discontent with maternity?

MR COKER: No, my lord. It bears on the question of custody.

MR JUSTICE QUEM: That is a secondary issue. But very well. Go on.

MR COKER: I am greatly obliged to your lordship. . . . Now, Mr Adcombe, on this matter of your wife's 'cynical indifference', as I think you said, to the prospect of becoming a mother. Can you give us chapter and verse?—Perhaps we were over-anxious, but my sister and I frequently had occasion to urge her to take care of herself, to run no unnecessary risks of a miscarriage.

Yes. But can you not give his lordship a particular example?—On one occasion I asked her to promise me not to travel by bus, because of the danger of falling, in getting on or off. She said: 'Who cares?' My sister then explained to her, in the kindest possible terms, that if she fell she might injure the child. Whereupon my wife said bitterly: 'That *would* be a pity, wouldn't it!'

MR JUSTICE QUEM: But in fact no disaster occurred?—No, my lord.

MR COKER: And you made every allowance? You put down her irritability to her physical condition?—Yes. I supposed it to be a temporary aberration.

And was it?—It was not. After the child was born she seemed, it is true, relieved, but scarcely less discontented.

Leaving that point, did your wife, some eight months ago, that is in July of last year, make a certain communication to you?—Yes. She said our marriage was over for her, and that she wanted a divorce. She implied, then or later, that she was in love with another man.

Did she tell you his name?—No.

What was the result of that conversation? Did you take any action?—No. Some weeks passed, and we had other and similar conversations. I did all I could to dissuade her from what seemed to me an absurd idea.

You mean the idea of divorce?—Yes.

And after that?—I had to go into a nursing-home for treatment. When I got home again my wife was gone.

I see. Did she leave behind any letter to indicate her

further intentions?—No. But she wrote to me a few days later.

You received a letter from her?—Yes.

Will you tell his lordship what she said in the letter?—She said she was staying with Mr James Mardley at an address which she gave.

Was it 9a Hargreave Mansions, S.W. 14?—Yes.

Is this the letter?—Yes.

As a result of receiving that letter did you institute certain inquiries and subsequently start these proceedings?—Yes.

MR LEONARD EARP, K.C. (intervening): May it please your lordship, I appear for the second co-respondent cited in this case. My client is a married man, and a professional man, and I am instructed to contest the allegation against him, which he is prepared, if necessary, to deny categorically.

MR JUSTICE QUEM: Isn't this somewhat belated?

MR COKER: If you will allow me, my lord, I understand that my learned friend was instructed only yesterday. And may I say——

MR JUSTICE QUEM: It is very irregular.

MR COKER: May I say that I hope to be able to accommodate my learned friend? In short, I do not anticipate that it will be necessary to proceed with this particular allegation.

MR JUSTICE QUEM: But do you withdraw it?

MR COKER: I have no authority from my client to do that, my lord, but I believe it will be unnecessary either to mention the name of the second co-respondent or to call evidence.

MR JUSTICE QUEM: Are you content with that, Mr Earp, or do you want an adjournment?

MR EARP: I am in your lordship's hands. My client, whose name appears in the depositions before your lordship, is naturally most concerned to avoid odious publicity. But if he should chance to be named in open court I shall respectfully ask for an adjournment.

MR JUSTICE QUERM: Is that understood, Mr Coker?

MR COKER: Perfectly, my lord. . . . Thank you, Mr Adscombe. That's all. Call Annie Mabel Staines.

The witness STAINES said she was employed by Mr James Mardley, at 9a Hargreave Mansions, as a 'daily'. She went to his flat six days a week, and it was her habit to arrive there at half-past seven and prepare his breakfast. She had a key of the flat. Shown a photograph, she identified it as that of a young woman known to her as Mrs Olive Adscombe.

MR COKER: Where have you seen Mrs Adscombe?—At Mr Mardley's, sir.

In Mr Mardley's flat?—Yes, sir.

When you arrive at the flat in the morning, what do you do first?—Get the kettle boiling, sir.

Yes? And what then?—Make Mr Mardley a cup of tea.

I see. And where does he drink his morning cup of tea? At the breakfast table?—Oh no, sir.

Where then?—In bed, sir.

You take it to him in his bedroom? Is that right?—Yes, sir. I knocks at the door, sir.

Quite so. You knock at the bedroom door and go in with your tray?—Yes, sir.

Do you find him alone when you go in?—Yes, sir.

Always?—No. Not always, sir.

Can you remember any occasion on which you have found him not alone?—Oh yes, sir.

Well, will you please tell his lordship about that?—He's not always alone, sir. Often he isn't.

I see. Now when he's not alone, who is with him?—The photograph, sir.

The photograph?—Mrs Adscombe, sir.

When taking Mr Mardley his morning cup of tea, you have seen Mrs Adscombe in Mr Mardley's bedroom, with Mr Mardley? Is that right?—Yes, sir. I take a cup for her too, sir.

Whereabouts in the bedroom have you seen her?—In bed, sir.

Are there two beds, or one?—Only one, sir.

MR JUSTICE QUEM: That will do, Mr Coker. The point is made.

XIV

THE report had come, with a brief covering letter, from his legal acquaintance Bruce Tollington. Reading it Heywood was conscious first of shame, a perplexed angry shame, and then, on an afterthought, of sardonic wonder. For a reason he did not pause to examine, the evidence of Annie Mabel Staines made him wince, though in substance it was no more than he must have expected. The idea of Mr James Mardley, whoever he might be, was an offence to his imagination; and equally with that offender he hated himself, for having all too successfully pried into Olive's past life. Nor was he any longer sure of his motive, though he did begin to recognize himself as advocate rather than judge in her cause. When the first emotional turmoil had a little subsided, a new astonishment invaded him, taking shape in the thought that someone, and he had a shrewd idea who, possessed a quite extraordinary talent for covering up his tracks. That second co-respondent was either an ill-used or a very wily gentleman; and in any case Heywood didn't much care for him.

At this point in his reflections he called a halt to thinking and went to the telephone.

'Franzy here,' came the answer.

'Hullo, Franzy. It's Charles Heywood.'

'Yes?'

'Do you ever have a moment to spare? I suppose not.'

'What's on?' said Franzy.

'It's apropos of our conversation the other day. About Adcombe, you know. I've a fancy to come and see you for half an hour.'

'When? Now?'

'Whenever you say. I know you're a busy man.'

‘It may as well be now. You know how to get here?’

‘Am I interrupting anything?’

‘Nothing important,’ said Franzy. ‘Only work.’

He was at Franzy’s flat within the hour.

The large well-windowed room in which Franzy worked was the habitat of two different men, a man with a powerful impulse towards neatness and order, and a busy preoccupied fellow who couldn’t so much as put a book back on its shelf when he had finished with it but must needs drop it on the floor or add it to one of the piles on chair or table. And both men, as Heywood presently discovered, were Paul Franzy. The table at which he engaged on the work in progress was scrupulously bare of everything except paper, manuscript, a fat stick of sealing wax, and an alabaster bowl for spent matches. Near at hand, on a small table specially made for it, stood a typewriter ready for use. This controlled area offered the visitor’s eye a point of rest, a patch of civilization, amid the prevailing anarchy. It commanded a view of London’s river, the trams of the Embankment, and a few trees and shrubs gallantly surviving under difficulties. The disorder of Franzy’s surroundings and his own somewhat lazy appearance were at odds with that precision of style which the younger and more ferocious of his critics, fresh from school, found so little to their taste. All his tidiness, Heywood conjectured, went into his work: there was none left over for personal use.

‘I *am* interrupting,’ he said.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Franzy. ‘I never do much in the afternoon. If you ’d come in the morning I should have cursed you heartily.’

Heywood laughed. ‘You’re very cosy here. Do you know, I was a bit surprised to find you in the telephone-book. I thought you lived in the country.’

‘So I do. But in the country I’m a social animal.’

‘You’re married?’

‘Husband, father, and neighbour to all the village. Parish

councillor and bazaar-opener. In fact, every mortal thing except churchwarden. You 've no idea!

'No ivory tower for you then?' said Heywood, smiling.

'You run a school, don't you, Heywood? Ah, you don't know what trouble is! Try living in the green heart of the country, where you're at everybody's beck and call. When I want a little peace and quiet I come to town. I can work here.' Franzy lifted the contents of an easy chair to the floor and waved Heywood into it. 'Cigarette or pipe?'

'Neither, thanks.'

'What's all this about Adscombe?' Franzy asked.

'Well . . . it's not exactly about Adscombe. It's about Adscombe's child. I'm afraid you'll think I take myself a bit seriously, Franzy; but I'm the boy's head-master, as you know, and a bit of a difficulty has cropped up.'

'Oh?'

'I thought perhaps you could advise me.'

'Seems improbable. But fire away.'

It was not easy, in his presence, to take so sour a view of Franzy as one did of the unknown Mardley, though against Franzy too a retrospective jealousy was ready for kindling in Heywood's breast. That incipient resentment, held in check by a spontaneous half-liking for the fellow's company, was at least enough to spur Heywood on, to encourage him in his audacity, to make him willing—as normally he would not have been—to risk being sent about his business with a flea in his ear.

Rather heavily, Heywood began: 'As Richard Adscombe's oldest and most intimate friend, you must know more about the business than anyone else still living.'

'By the way,' Franzy interposed, 'who *said* I was his most intimate friend?'

'Pointing, for one,' Heywood said. 'And for another—Olive Shenley.'

'Olive said that?'

‘Well . . . implied it, shall we say?’

‘I see,’ said Franzy, cheerfully unconcerned. ‘I ’m not denying the fact, you understand. I only wondered where you got it from. Now about this “business” you speak of. What business?’

‘The break-up of his marriage, and so on. But first let me explain how *I* come into the picture. Young Stuart ’s at my school. He was put there by his legal guardian, Miss Julia Adscombe, in accordance with her brother’s earnest desire. She didn’t want to do it, I gather. She didn’t approve of what she ’d heard about us. I ’m not surprised at that. She ’d probably heard a lot of lies. But even if she ’d heard only the truth she wouldn’t have chosen Conington for her darling boy.’

Franzy’s lifting eyebrows warned Heywood that he must not at this stage indulge in satire.

‘Frankly, what I *am* a little surprised at is that Adscombe himself should have chosen us,’ he went on quickly. ‘But it may be, it ’s just possible, that he was attracted by the very things—the emphasis on freedom, the easy discipline, the absolute veto on coercion of any kind—that put her off. I suspect he had a pretty rough time at his own prep school, possibly at his public school too, and was desperately anxious to give Stuart a happier boyhood than his had been.’

‘Even at the risk,’ said Franzy, ‘of his electing not to learn Latin. I think you ’re very likely right. Richard doted on the boy. I do know that much.’

‘So I imagine, Franzy. But why, then, why in the world did he cut him off, post mortem I mean, from his mother, and leave him to the sole care of Julia Adscombe? I know he divorced the woman, and presumably for a sufficient reason. But what had she done that should make him stretch out a hand even from the tomb, so to speak, to prevent her so much as seeing the child?’

Franzy puffed at his pipe, apparently quite unperturbed by Heywood’s growing excitement.

'Is the question rhetorical, Heywood? Or do you really want to know?'

'I really want to know.'

'Why?' said Franzy bluntly.

'That's just what I was about to explain. I'm answerable to Miss Adscombe. She's Stuart's guardian and watchdog, and my paymaster. She insists that the boy must not be allowed to meet his mother.'

'Do you accept children on such terms?' Franzy asked.

'That's a shrewd question. And I daresay you imagine you've got me there. But you haven't. Children of broken marriages are just the *kind*, don't you see, that need the rather special care and understanding that we're by way of supplying at Conington. We believe that the first thing to do is to see that a child is healthy and happy. The learning, the acquisition of knowledge, is important but incidental. It's an ingredient of the happiness, if you like. He'll get knowledge, if one puts it in his way, because he has a natural appetite for it.'

'In short, difficult cases attract you?'

'Professionally, yes. For all that, I should have thought twice about taking Stuart Adscombe if I'd known what I was letting myself in for. I agreed to the conditions, like many another rash bargainer, because I thought they'd never be challenged by—the other side. But they were. The other side turned up.'

'She did, did she?'

Was it possible that Franzy was amused? And was it that, knowing so much, having been so intimately involved in that tangle of four years ago, he found it amusing to listen to the rambling conjectures of an outsider? He who had—or hadn't he?—the key to the whole puzzle.

'She did,' Heywood said. 'She came to Conington, demanded to see Stuart, and——'

'And appealed to your better nature,' said Franzy sardonically. 'I know.'

'You do?' cried Heywood. 'You *know*? But *what* do you know?'

His eagerness had carried him too far, and he repented it. Franzzy's secret, whatever it might be, was not, he judged, to be taken by storm.

'I know Olive Adscombe, that's all,' Franzzy answered coolly. 'Or did, once upon a time. It must be years since I saw her last. But I daresay her tactics haven't changed much.'

'Well,'—Heywood hesitated—'having said that much, you must say more, don't you think?'

'Must I?'

'You imply that she's a—schemer, to say no worse.'

'My dear Heywood! What woman isn't a schemer where her child is concerned?'

'Yes, but *was* her child concerned?—in your time, I mean.'

'In my time?'

'At the time you speak of, when you knew her so well, so intimately.'

Franzzy gave him a long, quizzing look. 'I wonder if you mean what I think you mean.'

'I mean,' said Heywood, 'that presumably you knew her before the divorce, while she was still living in her husband's house. Or even, for all I know, before her marriage?'

'No. I met her as Mrs Adscombe. I dined with them frequently, *en famille*. She accepted me as one of Richard's old friends. He and I were more or less of an age, you know. She, of course, was a youngster. Too young, perhaps, for the job she'd taken on. That may have been part of the trouble. But yes, we were quite good friends, Olive and I.'

'That being so, you probably know, as I said before, more about this business than most other people. You probably know what she did, or what happened, to provoke Adscombe into taking up that ungenerous, that dog-in-the-manger attitude about the child. That, you see, is where *I* come in.

I quite see that he would demand custody for so long as he was alive to enjoy his son's company. But why this hollow, forbidding voice from beyond the grave? It doesn't square with what one's told about him, his kindly nature, his magnanimity. You yourself, Franzy, used the word magnanimity.'

'You want to know,' said Franzy, 'if I can give the girl a good character. Or, alternatively, if I can blacken it for you.'

Heywood laughed uneasily. 'You asked me if that question was rhetorical. Well, it was, in a sense. Because, frankly, from what little I've seen of Mrs Shenley, I don't believe her capable of the only sort of baseness that would justify Miss Adscombe's attitude. But there must be *some* reason for it, for that maniacal vindictiveness. And I had a fancy that you, of all people, might know what it was.'

He caught Franzy's glance, and uncomfortably discerned in it the dawn of a sympathy that came dangerously near compassion. And still there was half a hint of amusement.

'It's very important to you, I can see,' said Franzy gently.

'It's important to me,' Heywood said, 'because it's important to young Stuart. If I support Miss Adscombe in this dispute I may be doing both him and his mother a grave wrong. I don't know: I say I may be. If on the other hand I take sides with Mrs Shenley, as she calls herself, Miss Adscombe will simply remove the boy from my school, and no legal power can stop her. What then? you may say. Who cares? Well, *I* care. That boy is at a highly critical stage of his life, and we at Conington can help him. He has obviously suffered a great psychological shock, but he's getting over it, he's returning to normal, and in a term or two, or at any rate a year or two, he'll be—how shall I put it?—out of danger. Now I daresay that sounds melodramatic to you, Franzy. You probably think that one school is as good as another, and that all he needs is to muck in with other young gentlemen of his age, and toe the line,

and play up for his side, and respect his seniors, and have the nonsense knocked out of him. And you 'll write me off as a hot-head, an educational crank. But——'

Franzy put up a warning hand. 'We need a traffic controller here. Old fogey I may be, dear boy, from your point of view——'

'I 'm forty-seven,' Heywood interjected.

'—but may I mention, before you father any more archaic opinions on me, that even a simple novelist, even a parent, occasionally takes a look at human problems?'

Heywood felt himself reddening. 'I 'm sorry. I 'm being insufferable. But I do want to make it clear,' he went on, hurrying past an awkward moment, 'that this isn't just faddism or stupid complacency. I 'm not saying that my school is the best in the world. I know its limitations only too well. But I do believe that it 's the best for this particular boy, at this particular stage of his development. Now if Miss Adscombe takes him away, what will she do with him? She 'll either send him to a public school of the traditional kind——'

'And would that be a disaster?'

'For him, it might well be. I 'm not among those who raise a hue and cry against public schools as such. I was at one myself, and came to no harm so far as I know. But for a nervous, highly imaginative, ultra-sensitive boy suffering from shock, a different sort of regime is indicated, and a different atmosphere. Moreover, *any* change of school now would be a severe strain on him. All the ordeal of adapting himself to a new environment to be gone through again! But that 's not the worst possibility. The worst Miss Adscombe could do, and she 's quite capable of it, would be to keep him at home, where she could watch him and control him and love him day and night.'

'That would be the worst, would it?' said Franzy, non-committally.

'You might just as well put him in a lunatic asylum,'

declared Heywood hotly. 'The difference would be negligible.' After a moment's silence he said: 'You've led me away from the point. I'm still wanting to know *why*.'

'And you're convinced I can tell you?'

'Can you tell me this much, for a start? There were two co-respondents cited in the case. Yes, I made it my business to look up the records. But only one was named.'

'I remember that,' said Franzy easily. 'A rather unusual feature. Possibly unique.'

'The question is,' said Heywood, 'and you can throw me out if you feel like it, can you supply the missing name?'

'I can do better than that, my dear Heywood. I can assure you that the name, which in fact I *can't* recall, has no bearing either on the case itself or on your particular problem.'

'And that's all you can tell me?' said Heywood, with a sarcastic smile.

'Not quite all. I can tell you one thing, and I'm ready to swear it on the book, if that'll content you. The name *wasn't* Paul Franzy.'

XV

REMEMBERING Pointing's story, Heywood heard the disavowal with astonishment, yet found himself unable to disbelieve it. It was not merely that Franzy would hardly commit himself to a statement which could, if sufficient trouble were taken, be proved false: it was rather the man's whole tone and bearing that carried, on this mere point of fact, conviction. That Franzy knew more than he admitted was possible, was even probable; but his identity with this mysterious second co-respondent, which had been the king-pin of Heywood's tentative hypothesis, was now definitely exploded.

Franzy eyed him with grim amusement. 'You're surprised.'

'I suppose I owe you an apology,' said Heywood.

'For being surprised?' It was difficult to detect any resentment in Franzy's manner. He seemed unaffectedly friendly, and interested.

'For not frankly asking you the question you've just answered,' said Heywood ruefully. 'Or, if you like, for having it in mind at all.'

'Ah,' said Franzy, 'things *will* get into the mind. Don't I know!'

'All the same,' said Heywood, dissembling embarrassment by staring out of the window, 'I do apologize. And I think it's uncommonly good of you not to take umbrage. Most people would have told me to mind my own business.'

Slowly pacing up and down the room, Franzy paused to say: 'I begin to suspect it *is* your business, Heywood, in some sense. But we needn't go into that now.'

'I've been building on a totally false assumption,' said Heywood. 'Now I must start all over again.'

Franzy did not ask what had given rise to the assumption, and Heywood shrank from repeating to him a story which would have involved, in the telling, another series of impertinent probings.

'I shall remember the name of the fellow presently,' Franzy said. 'My memory's not what it was: there've been too many wars in our time. But it won't get you anywhere, because he was a quite insignificant and I believe much maligned person.'

'Then how, I wonder, did he come to be cited?'

'No smoke without fire, you mean. That's a misleading maxim. Fire there may have been, but only, I suspect, in poor Richard's imagination.'

'But you said——'

'I know. I know. I said he was magnanimous, tolerant, and all the rest of it. So he was. But that doesn't mean he hadn't his blind spots. He had what are called advanced ideas about things like crime and punishment. He would discuss anything with anybody, and listen courteously to the most outrageous opinions. Nothing said about him in print seemed to ruffle him in the slightest. I don't know if you've read that book of his: it was very good of its kind and fell flatter than it deserved. But he took criticism, the most unjust, the most ignorant criticism, like a lamb. That's what I had in mind when I spoke up for him the other day. In the intellectual sphere, where his achievements might have puffed him up, he was a very saint of humility. But of course there's another side to the picture.'

'There always is,' Heywood murmured.

'I knew Richard pretty well,' said Franzy slowly, after a pause for reflection. 'Better perhaps than any other living person. He had tremendous qualities, and I owe him a lot. But he did have—well, it's obvious—his odd, abnormal side. You're not by any chance a bachelor, Heywood?'

'A widower,' Heywood said.

‘Well, can you imagine what goes on in his psyche when an elderly male virgin plunges into matrimony with a girl half his age!’

‘I probably can,’ said Heywood, ‘but I think I’d rather not.’

‘Precisely. Well, there you have it—or part of it. My guess is that Richard, in that relationship, had the callowness of a sentimental boy, without a boy’s resiliency of spirit. A young man can come a cropper in marriage and perhaps be little the worse for it. Ten to one he’ll find another girl and try again. An experienced older man, because he *is* experienced, well, he too can take a defeat or two without thinking it’s the end of the world. But an older man without experience is virtually a man without defences. His vanity’s infinitely vulnerable. His self-esteem hangs by the merest thread. Consequently he doesn’t always behave quite prettily when the crash comes. As it happens, I wasn’t in close touch with Richard just at that time, so I’m betraying no confidences. In fact I’m only offering an opinion, for what it’s worth. Your second co-respondent, believe it or not, was a simple man of God. Yes, a clergyman. A clergyman, and friend of both sides, to whom Olive, knowing no better, went for advice.’

‘And Adscombe accused him! Without foundation! Surely a very gratuitous piece of malice?’

Franzy laughed, but without mirth. ‘I may be wrong, but that’s always been my theory, and Olive’s too, I fancy. Ask her.’

‘But it’s incredible!’ Heywood protested. ‘And that’s the man you called magnanimous!’

‘And so he was. I don’t budge an inch from that. Alas, has my eloquence been thrown away on you, Heywood? Because don’t you see the whole point of it is that the wretched fellow was thrown off his balance? He wasn’t himself. He was a writhing mass of pain. He was a lost spirit.’

'You mean he was a man who couldn't take his medicine without throwing a fit,' said Heywood coldly. 'If he wanted to divorce his wife——'

'But he didn't! He needed, on the contrary, a great deal of persuasion, I believe.'

'Very likely, but once persuaded why didn't he cite the convenient Master James Mardley and leave it at that?'

'Who knows? Maybe because he was so intent on securing custody of the child.'

'But, as I understand it, she didn't dispute that with him.'

Franzy shrugged his shoulders. 'I repeat, he wasn't himself. Presumably he wanted to make dead sure of it. Anyhow, for that reason or another, that's what he did. Threw in the reverend gentleman for good measure.'

'I see,' said Heywood. 'You'll admit it's not a pretty story.'

'Agreed, my dear fellow. But that's how things happen. We're not made of sugar and spice, any of us. A man not easily jealous, but, being wrought, perplexed in the extreme. I suppose that about sums up poor Richard.'

'I never could stomach Othello,' said Heywood, unappeased.

'If you'll excuse me I'll go and make a pot of tea,' said Franzy. 'It'll help you to cool off.'

XVI

A FEW days later Heywood went to see Miss Adscombe. He had answered her letter, with polite brevity, and on notepaper which told her he was in London. The result had been an invitation to tea. He was in two minds about going, and more than two voices debated within him, though the decision was never seriously in doubt. As a self-appointed spy in quest of the truth, and still more as one who was resolved to do the right thing by young Stuart, he could neglect nothing that might throw further light on the situation. When he stood back to survey it he did not quite like the look of his behaviour. He had compromised himself by making friends with Olive, and did not enjoy the prospect of double dealing which this visit to Miss Adscombe offered him. A woman who gave herself away so guilelessly as Julia Adscombe did was hardly fair game. To hoodwink her was too easy, like taking money from the blind. And he shrank from the prospect of a conversation which on his side must be full of evasions and concealments. It troubled him particularly that it was Julia who paid the school bills, so that any equivocation on his part in dealings with her must look like common dishonesty. On the other hand, if he could have found a good reason for waiving the fees, as in special cases he did, he would have been equally hampered by reluctance to trade on his own generosity. But that kind of argument led nowhere except to a weak-minded inertia. He saw that a man who embarks on espionage must concentrate, if he is squeamish, on the motive rather than the method.

The house in Harpole Square fulfilled Heywood's expectations in all minor respects, but he found it, in its sober and dignified reality, difficult to see as the scene of the

strange drama his imagination had been building up. Nor did Miss Adscombe herself look the part allotted to her. She greeted him graciously, even with a touch of warmth. She appeared unaffectedly glad to see him, and to see him as Stuart's friend. Her hostility to Olive, the memory of which was present all the time at the back of his mind, seemed to be a fact curiously unrelated to her personality. This domestic interior, with its solid comfort and its precise conventional decoration, seemed to deny the existence of violent or ugly passions. Nor was it entirely an Edwardian effect: someone, it was evident, had a nice taste in modern water-colours. These pictures and the elegant austerity of the furnishings combined with generous window space and a green prospect to make the room Miss Adscombe received him in a pleasant one; and Miss Adscombe herself, with her neat prim figure, her white hair, her childlike blue eyes, was not out of place in it. It was the first time Heywood had seen her except in her outdoor clothes, and the difference was disconcerting because it compelled him, against his will, to revise his conception of her. This was the innocent author of that letter, an altogether less formidable person than the severe lady who had confronted him at Conington. At his entry she rose from her seat at her small grand piano, where she had apparently been playing Chopin. Nothing less characteristic of the woman he had supposed her to be could have been imagined.

‘How nice of you to come, Mr Heywood!’

‘Nice of you to ask me,’ he said conventionally. ‘And nice of you,’ he added, surprised into naturalness, ‘to play me in with one of my favourite things.’

‘Surely, Mr Heywood, you ’re too young and sophisticated to admire Chopin?’

‘That particular one,’ said Heywood, ‘has associations for me, though I ’ve forgotten what they are,’ he added self-protectively, with a sudden vivid memory of his lost Clare. ‘You play a great deal, I fancy?’

'I did once upon a time,' said Miss Adscombe, with a wintry smile. 'But my fingers are made of wood nowadays.'

Heywood laughed sceptically. 'That wasn't my impression.'

'There was once some thought of my doing it professionally,' she admitted. 'Our mother wished it, but she . . . died too soon. And I gave up the idea for Richard's sake.'

'I see,' said Heywood politely. 'Still, music—to have it, I mean, at one's fingers' ends—must be a wonderful resource.'

She gave him a bright smile. 'It's all I've got now. Except my girls, and of course Stuart.'

'Your girls?'

'My Girls' Club. At Hammersmith. They need a lot of guidance, you know.'

'I'm sure they do,' said Heywood, repressing a shudder.

A middle-aged housemaid entered, pushing a tea-trolley before her. 'Shall I brew the tea, m'am?'

'Yes, Jinnie. No, you needn't set out the things. We can manage.'

'And how is Stuart?' Heywood asked.

'Very well. And happy, I think, in his quiet little way. At first he seemed almost a stranger, after his term away. But now he's my boy again, so responsive and considerate. He'll be in presently. He's gone for a walk in the gardens.'

'Kensington Gardens?' Heywood asked disingenuously.

'Good gracious, no! Not a little boy like him! You're joking, Mr Heywood. I mean the residents' garden belonging to the Square. I have a key, of course. It makes an excellent playground for him. He can come to no harm with one of us keeping him in sight, either Jinnie or myself.'

'Surely you can't see him from the house?' said Heywood.

'No, we go with him. But, today, Arnold is with him.'

There! That's a surprise for you, Mr Heywood!' Her manner was almost arch. 'Arnold Watts, whom I'm sure you must know very well. Quite a nice little friendship they've struck up together.'

'And you asked Arnold to come and stay with him,' said Heywood, warmly approving. 'What an excellent idea!'

He felt himself rebuked for his former hasty judgment of Miss Adscombe, and her next remark seemed to confirm his new impression.

'After being with boys for three months on end, I thought to change that lively company for that of two old women would be too drastic,' Miss Adscombe explained. 'So Arnold is here for a fortnight. Besides,' she added ingenuously, 'I'd heard so much about him. It was Arnold this and Arnold that, all day long, and I wanted to see for myself that he was a suitable friend for Stuart. An older boy can exercise an influence, don't you think?'

'Yes, indeed,' said Heywood. 'But you need have no anxiety on that score. Arnold Watts is a very normal and amusing child. Intelligent too. It happens that I know his parents well, and'—instinctively he assumed the slightly pompous tone that was expected of him—'I can speak of them both in the highest terms. I hope you'll let Stuart pay a return visit.'

'We must see. We must see. That *has* been suggested. I want him of course to be a manly boy, but he's very young. It won't do to let him stray too far from the nest. Sugar and milk, Mr Heywood?'

For the sake of saying something Heywood presently began speaking about the house.

'It's larger than we need, you must be thinking,' said Miss Adscombe, 'now that Richard is gone from us. Though indeed I hardly feel he has. And neither does Stuart, I fancy. Such a loyal little boy! To go elsewhere would be a terrible wrench for us both.'

'It's your own house?'

'Richard bought what remained of a ninety-nine years lease. Dear me, that seems a lifetime ago! There are twelve years still to run. It'll last my time.'

'I hope not,' murmured Heywood politely.

'Nonsense!' said Miss Adscombe. The transition from plaintive to brisk was startling. 'One doesn't, I hope, wish to live for ever,' she said, with the air of repudiating a vulgarity. 'In twelve years, if it's God's will, I shall be with Richard again.'

Heywood looked at her with surprise politely veiled by an appearance of sympathetic interest. Involuntarily he pictured a neat little guaranteed heaven, from which Richard could never escape.

'So you like Arnold Watts, Miss Adscombe? I'm glad to hear that.'

'He's a friendly child,' said Miss Adscombe. 'And such charming manners!'

Heywood was gratified by this remark. It was one not often made of Conington children by people of Miss Adscombe's generation. He had supposed she would look for a more ceremonious respectfulness than Conington standards enjoined. A disconcerting woman: she wouldn't stay in her pigeon-hole.

'Robert, his father, is a schoolmaster, poor fellow, like me,' said Heywood, smiling. 'We've known each other for years. I'd like to think my school could take some credit for Arnold's good manners. And indeed I think we can, a little. But, contrary to what you may have heard of me, Miss Adscombe, I do think home environment important. And more than important—in the last resort it's decisive.' He refrained from mentioning his prime conviction, that the mis-education of parents was the chief difficulty he as a schoolmaster had to contend with. If only he could have had the fathers and mothers to school! 'And, if I may say so, I do think it most awfully wise of

you to recognize, as you do, that Stuart needs companions of his own age, even in the holidays.' It was part of Heywood's considered tactics always to praise a child when it showed sense, even at the risk of uttering platitudes. He went on with the treatment. 'It takes courage, sometimes, and imagination always, to let a child develop in his own way without an excess of—guidance. And especially, of course, a child in Stuart's peculiar position. The Wattses,' Heywood ran on, hurrying away from dangerous ground, 'are among the very nicest people I know. Do you know their part of the world, Miss Adscombe?'

Miss Adscombe said she did not; and Heywood, hoping to reconcile her to the idea of Stuart's return visit, launched out into a description of the Salisbury country, with its trees and water meadows and wide undulating plains.

'And of course,' he said, 'the place is saturated in history.'

'Of course,' Miss Adscombe agreed. 'Did you say Mr Watts was a schoolmaster? How very original of him to send his own boy elsewhere to be educated!'

'He thinks it best for the boy, and I'm bound to say I agree with him.'

'Would *you* have done that, Mr Heywood? You haven't any children, I think?'

'No,' said Heywood, answering the second question first. It hurt him a little, like biting on a loose tooth.

'Our young gentlemen are back, I fancy,' said Miss Adscombe, cocking an ear towards the door. 'Come in, my dears!'

The door opened narrowly and the face of Arnold Watts peered round its edge.

'May we have tea in the kitchen with Jinnie, Aunt Julia?'

'Yes, dear boy, if you like. But haven't you a word for Mr Heywood? You *are* acquainted, I believe?' said Miss Adscombe with airy humour.

Arnold came in, marched sedately up to Heywood, and shook hands with grave ceremony.

‘How do you do, sir?’

The unusual formality amused Heywood, but he restrained his impulse to banter. He saw that Arnold was putting on an act, and, what was more surprising, not overdoing it. Cunning little monkey! And she’s his Aunt Julia already!

‘Well, young Watts? Having a good holiday?’

The ‘Watts’ was a tribute to the boy’s bluff: he had always been ‘Arnold’ before. Seeing in his eyes the ghost of a cherubic grin Heywood had the comfortable feeling that he and Arnold were fellow-conspirators. But to what end?

XVII

So he was not to see Stuart again just yet, it seemed. That experience was postponed until the two boys should have had their comfortable kitchen tea and should present themselves, cleaned and fed and ready for social duty, in the drawing-room. Heywood had learned so much and conjectured so much more since his last sight of Olive Shenley's son that he was conscious now of the pricking of a new interest in him. That he was Olive's son was his chief new title to scrutiny: that he was also Richard Adscombe's son, fruit of a grievous marriage, levied a darker claim. With these reasons of idle sentiment to justify Heywood's curiosity there was blended the more practical consideration, from which action must eventually ensue, that chance had apparently singled him out to be in some sense the arbiter of the boy's destiny. Easy it was, no doubt, to exaggerate the importance of what he in his wisdom might decide was best for Stuart; for whether any decision of his could be put into effect remained much in doubt. But it was easy too, and an imminent temptation, to make light of the whole problem, to dismiss it as the invention of a super-heated imagination, and so be rid of the burden.

'Yes,' said Miss Adscombe, taking up a dropped thread, 'it would seem like deserting Richard to abandon the house now. We've left his room untouched, just as it was. The room where he did his writing,' she explained. 'On his desk there was a bronze head of Voltaire which I hadn't seen for years. Even that I've left, little as I like it. We took nothing away except some dead flowers.'

'The death was very sudden, I understand?' Heywood said.

She nodded solemnly.

‘It must have been a great shock,’ he murmured, looking away.

Beyond a hushed assent she offered no remark upon that, and Heywood for a while was left to make what he could of his thoughts. They led him in a weary circle through all the old arguments, the pros and the cons, the statements and qualifications, the doubts and conjectures, and brought him back to the simpler practical question, from which he had just wandered, the question how long he might stay without outstaying his welcome, and, bound up with that, how long he must wait to get a sight and an impression of Stuart. As if she had been able to read his thought, at least where it related to her darling nephew and ward, Miss Adscombe at this point excused herself and went out of the room, saying she would be back in a moment.

The moment extended itself, and the first person to return was not Miss Adscombe but the maidservant Jinnie, come to clear away the tea-things. She was followed, a moment later, by Stuart himself, sent by his aunt to offer to show Mr Heywood where he might wash his hands if so inclined. In his zeal to perform this diplomatic mission the child seemed to forget that he was meeting his headmaster after an interval of weeks: dispensing with all forms of greeting he put the question point-blank and offered himself as guide, adding only that Aunt Julia had been called to the telephone but would be back in a minute. He hurried through his prepared speech, as children will, but Heywood’s genial casual reception of him relaxed his tension. His look of doubt, his anxious politeness, dissolved into a shy confiding smile, amused and half-conspiratorial as though with the consciousness of sharing a small joke. It vanished instantly, to be succeeded by a self-contained solemnness, but it had done its work, had established a kind of intimacy, and left a charmed memory behind it.

Heywood did not disclaim a desire to ‘wash his hands’: the invitation offered too good an opportunity to escape with

Stuart from the room to which Miss Adscombe had promised to come back 'in a minute', so that what talk they might have together should be not in her presence. It was perhaps fanciful of him to think he already saw a change in Stuart since last term: the change was more likely in himself, in his dangerously enlarged knowledge. He followed his guide out of the room, and as they went together towards the main stairway his ear picked up the high notes of Miss Adscombe's telephone-voice floating out from some not very distant room.

At the first-floor landing Stuart waited for him to catch up. 'It's there,' he said, pointing.

His pointing indicated a passage that ran past more than one room.

'At the end, on the left,' Stuart said.

His voice had become very small, and though his instructions were explicit Heywood hesitated to follow them, having in fact no interest in the room to which he was directed. The boy's manner excited an uncomfortable suspicion in him.

He said: 'Thank you, Stuart. Will you wait here for me?'

Stuart said he would.

'Promise?' said Heywood lightly.

'Promise,' said Stuart.

Heywood had the impression that the promise had been forced out of him, and when he rejoined him, something less than a minute later, he was sure of it. The boy stood stiffly waiting, almost like a soldier at attention except that his eyes were averted.

'Now we're here, Stuart, won't you show me more of the house?'

In the light of his painful idea he could not but guess that this was the last thing Stuart would wish to do. But it was not curiosity that made him persist.

Stuart did not answer at first. His face had a shut look,

but not so shut but that it was evident that he was conscious of a conflict between his inclinations and his duties as host, duties in which, Heywood surmised, he had been diligently and recently drilled.

‘Why?’ said Stuart.

The blunt question was scarcely answerable. ‘I only thought it might be fun,’ said Heywood meekly.

Perhaps it was that meekness that won him his point. ‘Of course, if you *want* to,’ said Stuart politely. ‘I’ll wait for you, if you like.’

To wait for him, it seemed, was the most he could bring himself to do. And that not without cost.

‘I thought you’d show me round,’ said Heywood. ‘But never mind,’ he went on quickly, seeing the shutters close again. ‘Now where shall I start?’ he asked, with false heartiness.

Stuart’s glance went furtively, fearfully, in the direction it least desired.

‘What’s that room, for instance?’ said Heywood.

He felt it cruel to press the boy so, but his intention was the reverse of cruel. He was in the position of a man called on at short notice to perform a surgical operation without anaesthetics.

Stuart’s answer did not surprise him. What surprised him was that he answered at all.

‘Don’t go there,’ Stuart said.

‘No?’ Heywood put a hand on his shoulder, wanting him to look up. ‘Why, Stuart? Tell me why, there’s a good chap.’

Still he would not look up. He seemed only to shrink a little under the friendly grip. Then he said breathlessly:

‘My father’s in there.’

Heywood stood very still, cold with shock.

Presently he said gently: ‘You mean that was his room, eh?’ No answer. ‘That was where he used to write, wasn’t it?’

The boy suddenly shifted his gaze from the floor, turning to Heywood a pair of large, tranced, unseeing eyes.

'He 's *in* there,' he said stubbornly.

'Is that what Aunt Julia told you?' Heywood asked. 'But that 's only pretence, isn't it.' His tone was firm and matter-of-fact.

Stuart looked sideways at the floor again, not answering.

'Listen, Stuart. You know your father is dead, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'And you know what dead means. Quite little boys know that, and you 're nearly ten, aren't you?'

'They put him in a box,' said Stuart.

'No, Stuart. What they put in a box wasn't him. You mustn't think that. He had died. He wasn't there any more. He 'd . . . gone away. Hadn't he?'

'Where to?' said Stuart.

Heywood inwardly cursed the conscience that prevented his spinning the usual fairy tale. But it prevented him none the less.

'That 's something we don't know.'

'Then how do you know he 's not in there?' said Stuart quickly.

How indeed? thought Heywood. 'I tell you what,' he said. 'Suppose we go and see, you and I? That 'll make sure, won't it?'

'That 's silly,' said Stuart. He was growing belligerent. 'It 's not what you see.'

Heywood recognized the crushing justice of the remark. He felt himself no match for the child and was suddenly afraid. He was afraid lest by further blundering he should alienate him altogether, forfeit his confidence, and so deprive himself of the power to help him.

'Have you ever been in there,' he asked, 'since . . .'

'Not since that day.'

'The day he died?'

'The day he gave me a letter to post.'

'Oh? He gave you a letter to post?'

'Yes, a great fat one.'

'And you never saw him again after that?'

'No. But he was there.'

To distract him from that obsession Heywood said: 'And what did you do with the letter?'

'I posted it, of course. Down the road.'

After a moment's hesitation Heywood asked: 'Did you show it to your Aunt Julia?'

Stuart shook his head. Heywood, having already repented of the question, observed with relief that Stuart saw no significance in it. But he dared not follow it up with another that was in his mind. Had Adscombe, he wondered, made a point of Stuart's posting the letter himself, and without telling anyone? And did he, at that moment, know that death was at hand?

'How did it happen, Stuart? Did you just happen to go into the room, and then he gave you the letter? Was that it?'

'Yes. Shall we go downstairs now?'

Heywood felt it to be important that Stuart should see into that room, that the spell upon him might be broken. In fancy he saw the child burst in, full of friendly importance, to announce that he had posted the letter. And what did he find? Perhaps something the memory of which only a further and everyday acquaintance with the room could confuse, soften, and finally erase. But in face of Stuart's resistance he dared not force the attempt now. Miss Adscombe had left the place untouched, she had said. That was bad enough, but Heywood, knowing what he knew, could not be sure that she had done no worse. Afraid of what he might see, of what Stuart might remember, he abandoned his half-formed plan.

'Shall we?' Stuart repeated.

'Let's,' said Heywood. 'Lead the way, son.'

XVIII

SOME ten days later Heywood sat at ease in a westbound train, idly watching the slow-flowing landscape. For the moment he was at peace with the world and with himself. Summer was going out in a glory of gold and brown, and as he floated into the region of the Severn valley the curve of the green hills and the wide sweep of sky affected him like music. His mood was sanguine and reflective, and the conflict in him, the feverish activity of the past few weeks, was stilled. Since leaving Miss Adscombe's house he had come at least to some interim decisions and put in train certain preliminary plans. That striving after judicial detachment, from which the radiant mystery of Olive had never quite seduced him, was abandoned at last. Where her beautiful eyes and dark warm voice had failed, though at heavy cost to his inward composure, that sealed room, and Stuart's notion of it, had succeeded. Olive or no Olive, the boy must be somehow rescued from the spiritual domination of Aunt Julia: that was the overriding imperative. For his further talk with Miss Adscombe, after coming downstairs, had been inconclusive, unsatisfactory. Carefully, summoning all his resolution, and all his resources of tact and firmness, he had contrived to put his view before her.

'I want to make a suggestion, Miss Adscombe.'

'Yes?'

'That room of your brother's. The one where he died.'

'Well, Mr Heywood?'

'He did die there, didn't he? At his desk? Forgive me for touching on a painful memory.'

'You are quite right. We found him there.'

'You and——?'

'Stuart, yes. It was very dreadful. And with Voltaire looking on, sneering.'

‘Voltaire?’

‘The bronze head, you know. I never liked that face—so sardonic! But it was a gift from a very old friend of Richard’s. They were at Cambridge together.’

‘Don’t think me impertinent,’ Heywood said. ‘Please believe that I ’m speaking as Stuart’s friend, and yours too, if I may say so.’

She inclined her head. ‘I appreciate that.’

‘My conjecture is,’ he said bluntly, ‘that your brother died by his own hand.’

‘Aren’t you going rather far, Mr Heywood? His heart had been a trouble to him for years. Ever since the operation.’

‘Quite so. Nevertheless it’s conceivable that he took an overdose of something or other, which a medical man could hardly do quite accidentally. His own doctor may or may not have told you this. In any case there was no point in raising a hue and cry about it. That would only have made things worse. But my point is this. That affair, however it happened, was a tragedy.’

‘For me and for the world,’ said Miss Adscombe.

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Heywood gravely. He fixed his eyes on hers. ‘But it would be something worse than a tragedy, don’t you think, if a child were to follow his example?’

The answer came sharp and angry: ‘What do you mean?’

‘That shut room, Miss Adscombe. That room where nothing has been touched,’ he said, with a sudden reversion to gentleness. ‘I ’m sure you can’t know, but the truth is, Stuart has made a bogey of it. He made that quite clear to me, not ten minutes ago.’

There was something of pity, something of spiritual condescension, in Miss Adscombe’s smile.

‘There are more things in heaven and earth——’

‘I’ve no doubt there are,’ said Heywood quickly. ‘But a child is too small a vessel to contain them all without disaster. You must know that as well as I do.’

'Forgive me, Mr Heywood, but I'm afraid you don't understand. That room is a symbol of something very dear to us both. It is sacred to us, a little homely shrine. Your modern world, I know, has no use for symbols, and still less for shrines. But there are some of us, even in this age of materialism, who look deeper, deeper and further. For us, they who have passed over have all gone into a world of light, as Henry Vaughan so beautifully says. You don't believe that, I daresay. The more unhappy you. But you must allow others to believe it. You must allow others to be true to their own vision.'

'My dear Miss Adscombe, it's not a question of what you or I believe. The question is whether we're justified in frightening a child.'

'But Stuart isn't frightened! Frightened of his own father! Of course he isn't.'

'I assure you, the child is haunted. In my opinion the room should be opened up and dismantled and its character entirely changed. Make it into a playroom if you like,' said Heywood, suddenly inspired, 'but at least make *something* of it, other than a sepulchre. Have it redecorated. Put a new window in somewhere. Cover the walls with maps and bright-coloured pictures. Let *me* do it, Miss Adscombe, for Stuart's next birthday.'

She seemed a little mollified by his enthusiasm. 'That's a kind thought. But your point of view is new to me. I must think it over.'

'To be plain with you,' he exclaimed incontinently, 'I'm afraid for the boy's reason.'

She winced visibly. He saw he had touched a sore spot, and thinking things over he was by no means sure that the remark had not been a blunder, calculated to undo what little good he might otherwise have done. That there was a hard core of obstinacy in Julia Adscombe he could not doubt, and that she was an unsuitable guardian for a sensitive imaginative boy was alarmingly plain. The tables were

turned. The investigation of Olive's moral fitness for the task had given place to the discovery of Julia's gross incompetence, if no worse: a conclusion which sent him hotfoot to Olive with a sudden new scheme in his head.

He told her what had happened and outlined a policy in which he invited, or pretended to invite, her co-operation. In fact, as he knew, he was being guilty of an irrelevance; for there was no connexion in logic between Stuart's need of rescue and Olive's need—if need it were—of Stuart. He went to Olive, not because she could help him to dispossess Julia—for clearly she could not—but because he was weary of even pretending to impartiality in the quarrel, and because he wanted a comrade and a confidante in his enterprise, and because, whether for this reason or that, go to her he must. But his intentions, alas, except in the region of that irrelevance, hardly amounted to a plan; for they amounted to little more than a resolve to make Stuart the object of his special care, even at the risk of a seeming favouritism and of exercising what in any less critical circumstances he would have regarded as an undue personal influence. Since the boy was being perniciously influenced at home, to withhold a counter-influence, he argued, would be an excess of punctilio. There were many ways, direct and indirect, by which that young mind could be 'got at' and 'interfered with' for its own good: Heywood's use of these expressions implied a conscious and defiant hauling-down of the flag of at least one of his advertised educational principles, though indeed, being an artist in his own field, he had never allowed theories to cramp his creative style. There were many ways and many agents, for he would enlist the whole Conington staff into his army of liberation. But the best allies of all, he knew, were those who would need no enlistment: he hoped for much, especially, from Arnold Watts, and from the possibility, to put it no higher, that Stuart would be allowed to spend some part of another holiday in the bracing air of the Watts household.

Olive listened, warmly approving. But at last she said wistfully: 'Yes, Charles. But where do I come in?'

'Nowhere precisely,' said Heywood. 'But everywhere, because he's your son.'

'He's my son and I'm not to come near him?'

'That's about it.' He added, with a rueful, persuasive smile: 'But it's in his own interest. And that's what we're both concerned with, isn't it?'

'But you said I could help,' she objected.

'So you can, by being very good and self-effacing. I know it's not easy, but other mothers have done it. After all, you've been without him for years now. A little longer can't make much difference.'

'Yes, but why, *why*?'

'My dear girl, it's too obvious. The moment I show my hand, by conniving at your visiting Stuart, Julia will remove him from Conington. I can't stop her doing that. Nor can you. And then we should be helpless.'

'Should we? I'm not so sure.'

'But of course! Legally she holds all the cards. We could do nothing. Damn it, Olive, she could keep him at home with her and send him to a day school if she chose. And what she'd make of the poor little devil in another five years I shudder to think.'

'I see. Then that's settled. What do you think of my little flat?'

The abrupt change of subject made him unhappy. He was afraid she thought he was treating her grievance too casually. It was the first time he had seen inside her flat, and he liked it, found its interior restful and expressive, individual and unobtrusive. But he was in no mood to say so.

'I'll tell you what I *will* do, Olive. See?—I've got a bit of sugar for you after all!'

'To take after my nasty medicine?' she said.

'Exactly.' He produced his bit of sugar, which he had

been keeping back for just this moment. 'You *could* come to Conington, yes, and see Stuart. But on conditions. Will you make a compact with me?'

'What are the conditions?'

'First that you come incognito. And second, that you *see* him without meeting and talking with him. Would that be too painful?'

Olive pouted, not unattractively. 'It sounds to me horrible, elaborate, and rather silly.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Sorry!' He was disappointed. 'It's the best we can do, I'm afraid.'

'Well,' said Olive wearily, 'I suppose it's better than nothing. All right. I'll do that. Kind invitation graciously accepted.'

'Don't you see, my dear? If you talk to him and he recognizes you——'

'But he wouldn't. He couldn't, poor lamb, after all these years.'

'But anyhow, whether or not, you'd make an impression. You do, you know. Take my word for it. And then he'd say something about it at home, and the fat would be in the fire.'

'We could make him promise to keep it a secret,' said Olive musingly. 'No, we couldn't.' She made a wry face at the notion. 'That would be intolerable for him.'

'I'm glad you feel that,' said Heywood warmly. Standing very near her, he was tempted to say more, and to put to the proof another plan that was forming in his fancy. But a word spoken too soon might be misinterpreted, and he said instead: 'I wish you'd tell me about James Mardley some time. That is . . . unless you'd rather not, of course.'

It was the first time the name had been mentioned between them.

'Jimmy? He was a charming boy.' She smiled at a distant memory. 'I haven't seen him for years.'

Heywood felt himself to be something less than an intruder, because for the moment she seemed scarcely aware of him. But her next words showed her alive not only to his presence but to the oddness of his question.

'I wonder what makes you ask, Charles? Did Julia tell you that too? You *did* have a lovely gossip, didn't you!'

'I think you know what made me ask.'

'Do I? I wonder.'

It was perhaps a challenge, but he let it pass.

'Were you in love with him?'

'I was very fond of him.'

'But that isn't quite the same, is it?'

'*Dear* Charles! You're beautifully transparent, sometimes. You mean, if I wasn't in love with him how could I be so abandoned as to live in sin with him, even for the purpose of divorce? Isn't that it?' She waited, but Heywood said nothing. 'Well, I did love him—enough. He was very good and kind to me and we were the greatest friends.'

'You didn't think of marrying?' Heywood asked, and asked anxiously, though he hardly knew which of the only two possible answers would cost him the lesser pang.

'We did think of it. Naturally. It crossed our minds, as a possibility. But by the time the decree was made absolute we had thought again. In fact by then Jimmy was already married to someone else, with my blessing.'

'And you had no regrets?' Heywood began to feel happier. 'It all sounds very lighthearted, that affair.'

'Yes, thank heaven!' she said fervently. 'That was exactly the blessedness of it. I'd had enough of the other sort, God knows. But permanent marriage with Jimmy, till death us did part, would never have worked.'

'No? Why?' Heywood deplored his persistence, but he passionately desired to be convinced on this point.

'He was too young, for one thing. And——'

'Younger than yourself?'

‘Not in years, no. But . . . well, younger than my husband ought to be, don’t you see?’

‘Quite so,’ said Heywood. He was quite of the opinion that Olive’s husband should be of mature years. ‘He was too young, just as Richard was too old?’

‘Richard?’ she echoed. ‘But Richard was younger still—except in book-knowledge.’

‘Poor you! You haven’t had much luck. Tell me frankly, Olive,’ he said, ‘will it give you any satisfaction at all to see young Stuart at a distance, in the way I’ve suggested? Or will it be merely tantalizing?’

Leaning back in his corner seat, watching the checkered counties float past the carriage window and recalling moments of the last conversation with her, Heywood revolved in his mind that other plan, of which he had not yet spoken to Olive. It was not so much a plan as a hope, and not so much a hope as a daydream, in which Olive Shenley, under the legally acquired but obscuring name of Mrs. Charles Heywood, had abundant opportunity, during nine months of each year, of cultivating the acquaintance and watching the development of Stuart Adscombe, who in time, as could hardly be doubted, would come to regard Conington as his true home, Aunt Julia notwithstanding. But Stuart was incidental to the plan, though a not unimportant incident, and in angling for his own heart’s desire Heywood did not wish to bait his line with anything extraneous. Therefore, even at some risk, he must bide his time. It was enough, for the moment, that he would be seeing Olive at Conington before another week was out. So it had been arranged between them, and it was this prospect, even when he momentarily lost sight of it in contemplating other things, that lent a golden colour to his thoughts in the train.

At Conington he found the usual pile of correspondence awaiting him, and among it was a bulky sealed packet marked *personal* which his secretary had left unopened. It contained some twenty pages of typescript, with a covering

letter from the sender, Paul Franzy. My dear Heywood: After our talk of some weeks ago, you probably went away with the impression that I could have told you more of that affair if I had chosen to. Well, you're right. I'm sending you a copy of a letter from R. A. to myself which I never imagined I would show to anybody. It will be obvious to you, when you read it, that I didn't lightly decide to take this somewhat extraordinary action. Indeed it has cost me a savage effort, and moreover I must take the risk of your thoroughly disliking me for it. But my guess is—you'll forgive me if I'm wrong, and more readily perhaps than if I'm right—that your questions about Olive were not so disinterested as they pretended to be; and on the whole I'd rather you thought me a cad than have the discomfort of watching you walk blindfold into a trap of your own setting. What you do, once you know the facts, is of course your own affair. I wish both of you nothing but good. And I hope it's not mere personal resentment that turns me into a talebearer. At this distance of time I'd be the first to make excuses for her. No doubt she was hard-pressed, perhaps desperate. But the plain fact is that she planted a malicious fable in poor Richard's mind and so destroyed two friendships—for I was never on terms with either of them again. I hardly expect to be thanked for this information, or to make you believe how little I enjoy butting in. But you put some very straight questions to me, and on reflection I feel I owe you a frank answer—even to the question you didn't quite ask. Yours, Paul Franzy.

XIX

PAUL, your letter has come. I believe you, but I can't bear to see you again yet. Time may alter that. I don't know. If I'm wrong in believing you, if you are lying to me, it hardly matters now. But I do believe you. Your logic convinces my reason. What it can't do is to erase a certain picture from my mind, and so long as that persists, even though I may know it to be mere fancy, the thought of you carries a taint and a stench. Grossly unjust, you'll say, but I can't help it. And I doubt if it can matter as much to you as it did, once upon a time, to me. It was perhaps an impulse of kindness that made you write yet again, after the long silence. But it was a mistake. You had offered me denials before, and I had rejected them. This time you convince me, because, since our friendship is dead and damned anyhow, I cannot conceive what purpose, except the establishment of truth, could have provoked you to raise the subject yet again. But your letter does more than that. It raises you from the grave, where I had comfortably settled you. Friends though we were, and for so many years, I cannot rejoice in that resurrection. You wronged me, as I thought, and so thinking I resolved that you should be dead for me henceforward. I wiped the slate of my memory clean of you, so far as a man can do that by force of will. There was a day at the Club when someone appeared in the billiard-room wearing your clothes, having your look, your face, your gestures; but since I knew you to be dead it could not be you, and I walked past him. But now, it seems, you are alive again, and instead of your having wronged me I have wronged you. But this makes no difference to you and me, except that I blame myself instead of you, or should do if it were worth the

trouble. However you look at it, your fault or mine or another's, a woman divided us and a lifetime's friendship is broken. Useless at this stage to try to patch it up. Useless and worse than useless. Get back to your grave, man, where I put you. I am safe in mine.

But this much I will do towards paying you my debt. I'll tell you, as best I can, how it happened. And then let the silence between us flow back and cover it up. I find difficulty in writing her name, because she is dead too, as you were. On no other terms could I go on living, after what happened. There was a woman—you will remember her, Paul—cast your mind back. She was my wife and we called her Olive. She was my second self. I poured out my heart and mind to her. Even before I was aware of loving her I did that. Accidentally, casually almost, obeying a simple talkative impulse, not pausing to consider the effect. I told her things I had told no one else, not even Julia, not even you. They were not secrets, you must understand. They were nothing dramatic or sensational or even amusing. They were things absurdly personal and infinitely unimportant, except to me. Except to me and to her. Yes, they were important to her too, those trivial confidences, and the moment that blissful truth dawned on me I was a lost man. They were important because we shared them. In particular we shared my childhood, and hers. As man and woman there was a gulf of years between us, but in remembering childhood we were the same age. Apart from Julia, I had never been really friends with a young woman before, except once, long ago, and that's another story. You will understand that I'm trying to find some logic or pattern in those events, and at the same time I'm afraid of deceiving myself, of getting it wrong. Things don't happen in an orderly sequence or conform to a pattern. Time drifts along, an unimpeded flow, and it's we who impose pattern on it after the event, giving shape and inevitability to something that had no

shape and was not inevitable. This means, doesn't it, that the clearer I make my story the more fictitious it will be, until I come to plain facts?

Falling in love is not a plain fact, it's a mystery, and how it happened to me is more than I know. That I should look upon Olive Shenley with desire was an idea utterly remote from my imagination. All such temptations had been put away from me many years ago. The poison crept back into my blood unawares, and under the specious guise of friendship and community of interest it got at last into my mind as well, ready to play pander. Of course I didn't see it so then. One day, one strange magical day, I found myself kissing her. How I came to be doing a thing so unpremeditated I didn't know and don't know to this day. I remember there had been some talk of her leaving my employment, and possibly that precipitated things. I don't know. All I know is that suddenly I was kissing her, and that her response sent me into a delirium of painful delight. I think now that time went back for me then, carrying me thirty years away, to an immortal moment, a chance missed, paradise for ever forfeited. But my first sober thought was of Julia, and what this would mean to her, and how she would take it. For I knew, in an instant, that it was a question with me of marriage or death. If I couldn't possess Olive for my own I would not consent to go on living, and marriage was the only tolerable way. That that would hurt Julia was obvious. I've just said that Olive was my second self. But Julia had been that for countless years, and man can hardly have *two* second selves, so I couldn't flatter myself that everything was going to be easy. Entranced though I was, transported far beyond reason, there was still room in me for a spark of resentment at finding myself in that sort of dilemma after a lifetime's care. When I mentioned the problem to Olive she put it lightly aside, and my madness received a check. I said to her: 'You do realize, my dear, that Julia must be

our first care?' She said quickly: '*Your* first care, Richard?' 'Not mine,' I answered. 'Ours.' She stood half-pouting at me and half-smiling, soft and sleek as a kitten, snow-cold in her maiden purity (so I thought, poor fool) and radiant with ripening love.

You tell me you have never been in love with her, Paul, but at least you have seen her, you know her beauty, her supple enticement, the amused dark tenderness of her voice, and how with a look or a smile she could ravish a man's soul from his body. You know, even though (as you say) you never entered it, the dark wide world of limitless enchantment in her eyes, the carnal bloom, the treacherous surrender and innocent-seeming wantonness. You know the taste of her mouth and the clinging of her hands. But no, you deny it. These things were not for you, for you tell me you were never in love with her and I have said that I believe you. I more than believe you, Paul, I congratulate you. Hail to you, O man of stone, whom the Lord hath preserved from the fowler's snare and the embracements of harlotry. You were luckier than your friend, whom, but for that luck, you would have betrayed to his damnation and your own. Yes, your own, my friend of many years; for there is a hell that yawns for Judas, if for no other. But not for you. You are godly and righteous and there is no fault in you. The woman tempted you and you did not fall. O excellent young man! Not so young either, and not without knowledge of the ways of women. It was there you had the advantage of me, for though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels no words can tell of the greenness of that second childhood of mine. Come, let us laugh at me together, the lovelorn dotard, the romantic lecher, born for cuckoldry as the sparks fly upwards. But you had no part in that, you assure me. She came to your flat, as I knew, as she knew, as you knew, as they knew, she came to your flat when you were short of a secretary, and did nothing for you but what

a secretary ought. She spent only a few hours in your company, sitting at a table with your typewriter before her. C'est entendu. I have said that I believe you. What you tell me three times is true. But—how can I make you understand this?—whether true or not true *it doesn't matter*, for the woman of whom we're speaking has been long dead. She died for me the day I lost her. Every scrap of her writing, every photograph, every book and trinket and ribbon she had touched, all went into the bonfire and were consumed, and she with them, and you, and my love for both of you, my fatuous love. Do what you like with her, and peace to your ashes. Why should the adulteries of ghosts dismay me?

That being understood, I can tell my tale soberly. There was a woman and her name was Olive. Outwardly she was an angel of sweetness and love, all innocence and modesty and acquiescence. Inwardly she was what? Perhaps you can tell me. It's part of your trade, isn't it, to know the insides of people? Pending your answer I will tell you that she was deeply in love—with herself. To get what she wanted there was nothing she would stop at, and what she most wanted, I soon discovered, was to be rid of Julia. To this end she carried to me tales of how Julia, as she said, had insulted her. 'She as good as called me a tart,' she once said to me. I could not believe that, and said so; but I couldn't help knowing what Julia might have said and, as events were to prove, with justice. I tried my best to smooth things over, not knowing then, as I know now, that those piteous hysterical bedroom scenes, the hinting and the pleading and the childish tears, were all part of a careful plan to estrange me from my poor sister. The birth of a child put a temporary stop to that. My young woman became more tractable and less demanding. The years drifted on and we with them. Whatever her faults of character she was a delicious young animal, as you have good reason to know. Or haven't you? It's all one.

Not you, my virtuous friend, but others have, plenty of them. A delicious young animal she was, the joy and the torment of my life. And the idea that I might lose her never once entered my mind—until, with a word, with no warning, she herself put it there.

XX

SHE broke it to me one night, when the rest of the household was asleep. It was not the most suitable moment to choose: one is hardly at one's best at such times. But to do her justice, as I am resolved to do, I doubt if she did choose it. What she said had been in her mind for a long time, and suddenly, time and place notwithstanding, it found utterance. You will bear witness, my friend, that I approach this matter calmly, with no motive but to acquaint you with the truth of what happened. And this is what happened. I went into her bedroom to say good night. You may perhaps conclude that I intended to stay there; or perhaps, since you find yourself so indifferent to her personal charms, such a notion would never have occurred to you. But the question, anyhow, need not arise: it is enough that I went into her bedroom. She stood at the dressing-table clad only in her nightdress, making her last mysterious feminine dispositions before getting into bed. Her back was towards me, but in the mirror she looked into I could see her large wondering eyes looking out. I could see her warmly illumined face and the dark disarray of her hair. I saw something else too. I saw the consciousness of my presence suddenly reflected in her young eyes. That look, that passing shadow on the brightness, did not, I must confess, diminish her appeal for me. In that moment she resembled a timid, gentle, innocent fawn, suddenly surprised in its lair. Or call her, if you can bear the triteness, a startled nymph glancing shyly from the brake. What you call *me* is your own affair. Picture me if you like with shaggy legs and a cornuted brow, for this last was soon to come. And, fool as I was, it gave me a prick of delight to find her, after years of marriage, still a

shy girl, maidenly modest, though maiden no more. It was on the tip of my tongue to exclaim on her beauty, the beauty to which you my dear friend were so mercifully blind, as you assure me; but before I could speak she forestalled me.

Turning to face me she said quietly: 'I'm glad you've come, Richard.' And snatching up a dressing-gown she slipped into it. The gesture surprised me. I could not repress the feeling that she was carrying modesty too far. And there was, I swear to you, a curious deliberation in the care with which she tied the cord about her waist.

'I came to say good night,' I said.

'I'm glad you've come, Richard,' she repeated, rather breathlessly, 'because there's something I want to say to you.'

I waited. There was that in her manner which put compliments out of the question. I had no idea of what was coming, but I was already vaguely uneasy. The worst I feared was that we were to have yet another dispute about poor Julia and her imaginary misdemeanours.

'I want you,' said Olive, with a steady look, 'to divorce me.'

To say that I was astounded would give a weak impression of what I felt. It would be nearer the truth to say I was struck senseless. I was dazed and incredulous. You as a novelist can perhaps find the right words to describe my condition. I can't. It's not in my line.

I think perhaps I smiled. The leering elderly satyr, you know. Yes, that about gets me, I fancy.

'Is this a joke, my dear?' I asked her.

'You know it isn't,' she said.

'Forgive me, but I know nothing of the kind.' I turned on a tone of frigid politeness, for even satyrs have their pride. 'I have not the least idea of what you're talking about.'

'I'm talking about our marriage,' she said. 'It's a

failure, Richard, and we've come to the end of it. Let's face that together, as we've faced other things. Please believe what I say, and be generous.'

'But how *can* I believe you,' I said, 'when you talk nonsense? You don't know what you're saying. You're over-tired. I expect young Stuart has been a little too much for you. Children can be very exhausting, especially to their mothers. We should never have got rid of Nanny. Well, that can all be put right. You want a holiday. Very well, we'll have one, just you and I together. We'll make a new honeymoon of it.'

At that, something like a shiver went through her, and I began to be really frightened. Till now I had been too much shocked, too stunned, to entertain definite fears; and my chattering had been almost automatic. But now I began to think. I began to consider her words in all their implications.

'Is it Julia again?' I said gently.

'No, no.' Her voice was infinitely weary.

'Are you asking me,' I persisted, 'to choose between you and Julia? Because, if so——'

Rather than lose her I would have said or done anything, but she answered, with a deliberate calmness: 'You did that long ago. And this has nothing to do with Julia, nothing whatever. Julia is perfect, and Stuart is perfect, but you and I have come to the end of our tether.'

'But, my dear Olive——'

'Don't, please don't try to confuse the issue. It's very simple. I don't want to be married to you any more. I want nothing from you except my freedom.'

I said: 'Who is the man?'

'And please don't be vulgar,' she broke out. 'It's not like you.'

'Who is the man?' I repeated.

I smiled at her, satyrically you may say. And she grew angry, or pretended to.

'Since you insist on asking that question,' she said harshly, 'there's no one. But of course,' she added, with the air of conceding a point, 'I shall supply you with the necessary evidence. That can be arranged.'

'And so,' I said, with gentle irony, 'you want me to divorce you. With no, shall we say, alternative in mind, you want me to throw you on the world, penniless, and with no means of support? Is that your brilliant idea? Think again, my dear Olive. Think out a more plausible story.'

'Do we have to argue, Richard? It seems so unnecessary. You know I had a little money from my father, and you know I can earn my own living. So why pretend?'

'And you propose to live, I take it, on your ninety pounds a year—or is it a hundred?—plus whatever you can pick up as a typist. You're not yourself, my dear. Go to bed like a good child. In the morning you'll see everything differently. I'll say good night now, and leave you.'

Give me credit, my dear Sir Galahad, for the pains I am at to give you a full, a plain, an accurate account of this interview. Every word of it is written in my brain and I transcribe it faithfully. I did not say good night and leave her, because she would not have it so. She went on talking, urging her impossible claim. She had, she said, another means of earning her living. Since marriage she had developed her talent for drawing and design. At my own suggestion, God help me, she had attended art classes in her spare time. It had seemed to me a pleasant and harmless hobby, which would help to distract her from her grievances; and now it was to be used as a weapon against me. Even so, it was a thin story and I did not believe it. Nor do I to this day believe it.

'Who is the man?' I said, for the third time.

'You will know that soon enough,' she said sharply. 'Oh Richard, why can't we part as friends, instead of quarrelling like this?'

'Ah! So there *is* a man!' I said.

'There will be, there will have to be,' she retorted. 'Or enough of a man to satisfy the silly law. You know that as well as I do. Why dwell on it?'

She kept up her pretence very well. She was a good actress, as all pretty young women are. Hypocrisy is in their wanton blood. Innocence and indignation is a game that comes easy to them. And then I did something for which I shall always hate myself. I sank so low as to plead with her. I abased myself. I tried to take her in my arms. I reminded her of the love that had brought us together and of the joy we had had in each other. I said she was mine and I was hers and nothing could ever make it otherwise. I spared her nothing. I recalled to her things she had said to me, and I to her, in the heat of our mutual passion. Yes, it was a disgusting display and it will afford you in imagination a pleasantly sardonic spectacle: the grovelling concupiscent old man and the weary, disdainful, nauseated girl, politely distressed and as frigid as she was lovely. Make a meal of it, dear friend: you will not look upon its like again.

I said: 'Does that all count for nothing?'

'It counts for much,' she answered, stifling a yawn. 'But it belongs to the past, Richard. And there were other things that it suits you to forget. I *am* tired now. I want to go to bed. Good night.'

'But we can't leave it at that,' I urged her. 'Tell me this, Olive. Tell me the truth. Do you not love me any more?'

'Good God!' she cried, in true Drury Lane style. 'Haven't you grasped that yet? What else have I been saying all this time?' I stared in silence, too bitterly wounded to speak, and she said, in her sly wheedling way: 'We get on each other's nerves, Richard. Why not face it?'

'You mean I get on your nerves?'

'Yes.'

'And for how long?' I coldly asked.

'For how long what? I want to go to bed, I tell you.'

'For how long have you not loved me?'

'Does it matter?'

'For how long,' I said, 'have you suffered my embraces unwillingly?'

'I didn't say that,' she said quickly.

'But it's true, isn't it?'

She did not answer. But I knew it was true, and I knew that I should never forgive either her or myself for that. The whole of my marriage was poisoned for me in that moment. I had bedded with a prostitute. She had put me in the position of a man who spends his lust on a lay figure, had degraded my romantic passionate ardour, my taste of paradise, to the level of permitted rape. Wearily, dutifully, perhaps with insulting pity and perhaps with frank scorn, she had put up with me.

'Well?'

'You make too much of all that,' she said. 'That's just something that happens. It may mean everything or nothing.'

'And to you, with me, it has meant nothing?'

'I didn't say that.' She saw she had gone too far. She still wanted something out of the old man: it was necessary to keep him sweet. 'I didn't say that and I didn't mean it. I don't really think it's worth discussing, do you? I don't want to be married any more. That's all we're concerned with now.'

'Nevertheless, I should like to know. Six months? A year? Or all the time? For how long have you tricked me into making a beast of myself?'

'You talk like a child, Richard,' she said coldly. 'You seem bent on hurting yourself. Do you enjoy it? Or is it only me you're trying to hurt?'

But I was now in command of myself. I had recovered at least a measure of poise, and I began to see everything

very clearly. Well, not everything perhaps, for there was more to come; but certainly her remarks had thrown a great light not only upon her, not only upon myself, but upon the whole modern school of moral philosophy. A grandiloquent phrase indeed for so shoddy an article. But perhaps I wrong the younger generation in thinking its members all conform to Olive's pattern. Indeed I hope so. As I understood her, and I forced her to discuss it further with me, being resolved to know the worst, this business of sex, which to my way of thinking was either, with true love present, a heavenly revelation or, without love, an abominable degradation, was to the woman I had made my wife neither the one nor the other. It was a negligible biological episode having no more significance than you chose to give it.

'Evidently, then, my dear Olive, if I were so unwise as to fall in with your crazy plan, which I assure you I've no intention of doing, you would have no compunction or reluctance about procuring the evidence of adultery which the law insists on?'

She evaded the question, and not unnaturally. It was no part of her plan, at this stage, to confess herself shameless.

'Conceivably,' I said, pressing the point, 'you would relish it?'

All she would answer was: 'Please go to bed, Richard. You'll only make yourself ill.'

'Or perhaps,' I said, 'you have already relished it?'

She went to the door, opened it wide, and stood there, waiting pointedly.

'Good night. I can't talk any more now.'

It was the first time I had been turned out of my wife's bedroom, and the last. I took care never to enter it again.

XXI

It may surprise you that Paul Franzy hasn't yet entered the picture. But don't be impatient, Paul, you'll arrive soon enough. Days went by, days and weeks. That is perhaps the most incredible thing of all, that long suspended crisis. It would seem impossible that after such a conversation between man and wife the two people concerned could go on, day after day and night after night, living in the same house, eating at the same table, and sleeping in adjacent bedrooms. But so we did. And Julia, who so often made a third with us, for some while noticed nothing amiss. In her presence, which was now a blessing to us both, Olive and I had always been more polite with each other than demonstrative, and we were polite with each other still. Olive's manner with me was if anything a shade gentler than before, a change which I accounted for in various ways. Sometimes I thought it mere tactics, a trick to gain her own ends. Sometimes I was fool enough to believe she was relenting, or even repenting, and to hope that she would presently make a sign to me.

And so she did, but it was not the sign I looked for.

There were no more bedroom scenes. Our next significant interview took place in my consulting room. It was late evening, at a time when I never saw patients except in an extreme emergency. Julia showing no disposition to retire to her own quarters that evening, for which one could not blame her since of late she had had pressing invitations from Olive to stay with us, I received my lady, at her own request, in a place filled with professional associations.

'You want to talk to me, Olive?'

'Yes.'

'I'm glad,' I said. 'We haven't had much to say to each other lately, have we.'

My tone was conciliatory, but it won no response from her.

'It was all said that night, Richard, so far as I'm concerned. Have you thought things over? At least there's been plenty of time.'

'I've thought of nothing else,' I answered, 'outside my work.'

There was silence between us then. A deadlock. Each waited for the other to speak a word that should release us from this tension. Or so, looking back, I must suppose.

'And you will divorce me?' she asked timidly.

There was appeal, and even a kind of anticipatory gratitude, in her voice and in the glance she gave me. That mask of meekness made me angry, angry and cold.

'You disappoint me, Olive. I hoped you had come to your senses and put that nonsense out of your mind.'

She sighed. She looked both embarrassed and impatient. 'Will you divorce me?' she asked again.

'How can I? There's no cause, you tell me. And I won't trouble you to provide any. No, Olive, I don't choose to divorce you. I'm a professional man, and to appear in the divorce court would not amuse me.'

'Not even as petitioner? Amuse you, no. But it could do you no harm. The mud would be thrown at me, Richard, not you. And I don't care a fig.'

'May I remind you,' I said, 'that you have a son?'

'I know.' She gave a wry smile. 'That's why I've stayed so long.'

'And you're willing to desert him?'

She did not answer.

'And never see him again?' I said.

'What do you mean? You'd never do that to me!'

I give you my word, Paul, she was a picture of injured innocence. The situation almost amused me, but not quite.

'So you seriously imagine, my dear Mrs Adscombe, that

I shall allow you to run off to another man, taking my infant son with you?’

No, she said, she didn’t mean that, because of course she wouldn’t be able to manage with him at first. She would have to make arrangements first. But afterwards, when she was settled into a new routine and making enough money to afford some domestic help, then she could have Stuart to stay with her, couldn’t she, in the holidays? Not necessarily *all* the holidays, she was good enough to concede, but some part of them. She contrived to look very winsome and appealing as she put forward this precious proposal, and there was not the least hint in her manner that she was aware of anything impudent in it.

I think I must have laughed out loud, for she said to me: ‘What is there to laugh at?’

Controlling my mirth I asked her gently: ‘Why only the holidays?’

‘I’m looking ahead,’ she explained, in all apparent seriousness. ‘He’ll be going away to school in a year or two, I expect, and in term time neither of us can have him, can we?’

‘How true!’ I said. Her calm assumption that the universe would rearrange itself to suit her personal convenience was undoubtedly the best joke in the world, but I can’t claim to have altogether enjoyed it. I had had evidence of her sublime selfishness before, but nothing on this scale. ‘But I shouldn’t waste too much nervous tissue on the question, my dear, if I were you; for I assure you it will not arise. On further reflection you will realize the folly of this divorce notion of yours. I will not say the wickedness, because your moral sense, if you have one, seems to be out of order at the moment. On the face of it your request is absurd,’ I went on, seeing her silenced. ‘Since, as I understand, you have no other husband in prospect, divorce would be pointless, as well as disagreeable. I’ve never questioned your comings and goings, and you

shall continue to live here, where you belong. You understand that I shall make no personal claim on you. You will not be molested.'

'Molested?' she echoed, raising her beautiful eyebrows.

'If you wish it,' I said, 'I'll have a lock and bolt put on your bedroom door.' That stung her. She flushed. 'Or perhaps,' I continued kindly, 'you would prefer to change quarters with Julia?'

The fellows at my prep school used to look at me curiously, because of my mother. I never knew how much they knew or guessed, but I caught them staring when they thought I wasn't noticing them. Getting away from that place was like being born again. Half a century has passed since then, but often I feel no older, and the taint clings. Why else should Olive have looked at me now, just as they did, with a fascinated, half-frightened curiosity?

It was painful, but it gave me an advantage too, which I was quick to follow up. 'I don't suppose it interests you, Olive, but I'm going into a nursing-home next week, to have a taste of my own medicine.'

Her eyes opened very wide. 'You didn't tell me! Is it serious?'

'I've told no one. And I don't want Julia told yet. It would alarm her.'

'But, Richard!' Oh yes, she put up a pretence of caring! 'What is it?'

'Polite of you to inquire, my dear Olive. But I won't trouble you with the technicalities.'

Nor you either, Paul. It is common knowledge that I had a major operation and that it didn't kill me. I was glad of that at the time, because there was Stuart to think of; but Olive, dear girl, provided me with plenty of reason to regret it. As soon as the more obvious danger was past she came to see me in the nursing-home, ready with the conventional solicitudes of course, but still full of herself and her projects.

I had buoyed myself up with the confident hope that my illness would have provoked a change of heart in her, and that as soon as I was fully restored we could make a fresh start together. I was soon to learn my mistake.

'I don't want to worry you while you're ill,' she said, having precisely that intention. 'But we must settle something, mustn't we? I keep thinking and thinking.'

'What do you keep thinking?' I asked her guardedly.

'If you don't like the idea of divorce,' she said, 'I'll drop it.' My heart gave a joyous leap. 'I'll just go away, and make a life for myself elsewhere. But of course,' she said gently, 'we can still be friends, if you're willing. I mean I can come and see you sometimes, you and Stuart.'

'I see.' I spoke with studied calm. I knew it was medically important that I should not excite myself, and I was determined to let her give herself away. 'And when, and where, may I ask, do you think of going?'

'Soon, I think. Before you get back home, Richard. It'll be better like that, simpler for everybody. And Julia will have you to herself. She'll love that.'

'And where,' I reiterated, 'will you go?'

Here, my dear friend, is where you come in. Forgive me for having kept you waiting so long.

'You could write to me at Paul's address, at Chelsea of course, not the country. I think I may stay there for a while, till I can find something permanent.'

I won't bore you with a description of what that bland announcement did to me. You earn your living by being imaginative, don't you? I leave the description to you. You know me. You've known me for forty years. Our friendship was one of the main props of my precarious existence as a reasonable being. Remove the prop and what happens? I give you three guesses, dear soul. But here, to help you, are some simple facts. I had often enough, since the beginning of the rift, run through a list of Olive's male acquaintances. She had not a few, as you

know, and I had always been perfectly easy about them. They came to the house, likable young fellows many of them. They ate my salt and called me 'Sir' and knew me for what I thought I was, a tolerant easygoing husband ready enough to enjoy their admiration of my wife. That admiration, so long as she was mine, enhanced her value. I made due allowance for her youth and I trusted her. It did her good, I thought, to have friends of her own age; and in this belief Julia warmly supported me. So when the break came I inevitably went through the list, asking myself: 'Is he the traitor? Or he? Or he?' But never once, dear Paul, did I consider you in this context. You, my lifelong friend. That was very simple of me, wasn't it?

Well, now I had to consider it. After a pause I asked her: 'Did you say something about Paul?'

'Yes. Paul Franzy,' she explained patiently.

'You propose to stay with Paul Franzy. Is that what you said?'

'I said at Chelsea, Richard. Paul's out of town just now.'

Her air of obtuse cheerfulness did not deceive me.

'Presumably he will come back, however,' I said. 'You seem very well acquainted with his movements.'

So far as I remember she offered no comment on this.

'Has he been consulted?' I asked her coldly. 'Is he aware of the honour that awaits him?'

Her eyes took on a dark, stubborn look. 'I'm sure he won't mind.'

'Will you be so kind as to look at me, Olive.'

Her stare was glassy. 'Well?'

'Are you in love with Paul Franzy?'

She looked away again, shrugging her shoulders. 'I'm very fond of him.'

'Is he your lover?'

'No,' she said. But the ghost of a smile settled in the corner of her soft red mouth.

‘Think again, Olive. Is Paul your lover?’

She tossed her head, with a childish twisting gesture. Her fingers were slowly tearing to pieces one of the flowers she had brought for the adornment of my room.

‘I’ve told you he’s not,’ she answered, smiling devilishly. ‘And I’ll tell you another thing, Richard, in case it should interest you.’ She lifted her head, like a snake about to strike. ‘He’s not the father of my child.’

I echoed foolishly: ‘Your child? Do you mean you’re pregnant?’

‘I mean Stuart, of course. I thought you would like to be sure.’

Where Olive had stood, there was now a smiling stranger in her shape. It was as though a devil had taken possession of her. Once before, a lifetime ago, it had happened to my mother’s son to see a beloved familiar face put on a smirking mask, or take a love-mask off, I could never be sure which. Once before, and now again. It was too much.

A merciful darkness fell, and the next thing I knew was a nurse bending over me. That other, thank God, had gone.

XXII

AN admirable performance, don't you think, considered judicially? I had treated her to protests, evasions, irony, sarcasm, and a whole series of minor pinpricks; and she had endured it all with an air of grieved patience. Then, in her own time, and still smiling, she had struck. She struck only once, and with that blow destroyed me. The neatness of the job, as I look back, entrances me. You could not wish for a prettier murder.

And it did the trick. I know now that what she said, or rather what she wanted me to believe, wasn't true so far as it concerned Stuart; but I was not then in a rational condition and the doubt racked me. Never mind for how long. Certainly for long enough. The nurses were good, they dosed and drugged me, going sometimes, I suspect, beyond their instructions for the sake of giving me peace. But they were also my jailers, standing—or at any rate hovering and watching—between me and self-destruction. Before I was sent back home, where I was at last within reach of final oblivion, I had recovered mental balance enough to be satisfied that there could at least be no doubt of my son's paternity. He is ludicrously like me: we have three or four quite definite physiological idiosyncrasies in common. But in the moment when I dismissed the suggestion I was the more appalled by the insensate malice that must have inspired it, the venomous hatred, the careful cruelty, things all alien to my conception of Olive even at her worst. I could no longer regard her as a human being. From the day of my return home, when I found her gone, she was dead to me.

But not so dead as you were, if your majesty will forgive the paradox. I did not for a moment doubt that you were

her paramour. Many a merry laugh you and she had had together between the sheets at my expense. I knew that. But because I knew it I would not admit it, even to myself. If she had sought her carnal pleasures with a younger man, for that I might have found excuses, palliations, reasons in nature and logic. Philosophy would have enjoined resignation to the inevitable, justice have urged mitigation of sentence. I was too old for her: I had always known that. Youth calls to youth—I had all the old maxims ready. But that you, another elderly scarecrow, should be her choice, and that you of all men should betray me, you my brother, this was more than imagination could endure. The pictures that rose in my mind were just a trifle too specific, if you understand me; and since I could neither deny nor accept the situation there was nothing for it but violence. I trampled upon you, and a bloody mess you made. I killed you. I willed that you did not exist. I blotted you out of memory. Would you believe it, dear heart, there was actually someone who called to see me at the nursing-home who gave the name of Paul Franzy. Who could it have been? I was happily too ill to receive him. Never once did it occur to me to cite you as co-respondent. What! Parade my humiliation in the courts! Expose your triumph! Spread a feast of offal for the gloating world! No, no, my bonny boy. I knew a trick worth two of that.

There was no more talk of divorce from Olive. In fact there was nothing from her. She was gone from me. Gross darkness had swallowed her up. She was as good, or as bad, as her word. Then, after some days, a letter came, giving an address in Kensington and saying she proposed to come and see Stuart, and could we talk things over? A likely plan! Needless to say, I would not see her. But Julia saw her, and so did Stuart. Julia behaved with exemplary courtesy, I have no doubt. What is Julia, who is she, that all our swains commend her? Between

them they pitched some tale that satisfied, or at any rate silenced, the child's perplexity about his mother's absence. There was a painful scene, they tell me, when Olive took her leave. Stuart burst into tears and had to be comforted with specious promises. I was determined that there should be no more of that, and soon afterwards, at Julia's suggestion, I engaged a detective to collect the necessary evidence. Had the address given by Olive been yours I would never have consented to do this. Even as things were I had no appetite for it. But Julia, with excellent good sense, convinced me that it was the only reasonable course, pointing out among other things that so long as Olive remained legally my wife I should be held responsible for her debts, unless I publicly repudiated them.

I fancy it was a surprise to Olive to be served with a writ. She wrote to me, in a somewhat injured tone, yet with a trace of her customary sublime impudence, saying that of course I wouldn't expect her to give up seeing Stuart from time to time, and hinting that unless I gave some such assurance she would defend the action and make it as unpleasant as possible for me. This was indistinguishable, to my mind, from common blackmail; and I treated it accordingly. I allowed her to understand that I should make no difficulty about the boy, beyond claiming legal custody, and made it clear that I should not communicate with her again except through solicitors. At intervals, since the decree, some person calling herself by the late Mrs Adcombe's name and style has foolishly presented herself at the house, so I understand, and has of course been refused admittance. I do not choose to entertain ghosts, and my duty to protect Stuart from such morbid fancies is clear. He is my son, whatever you may say, and he is all I have. Remember that. I have lived on solely for him, and to be frank with you, you shadow of Paul Franzy, I have lived too long, I've outstayed my welcome. There's wormwood in the cup, old truepenny. Tomorrow to fresh

woods and pastures new. Why did you have to stir it all up again, you polecat, you prickthorn, you dish of worms——

[*Note appended by P. F.* The letter ends there, with no signature. The handwriting shows no sign of stress or haste. In this copy, which is otherwise exact, I've re-paragraphed some passages for your convenience. You will draw your own conclusions from the document, and they may not be the same as mine. On the evening of the day I received it I heard over the wireless that my old friend had died in his sleep. Requiescat in pace.]

XXIII

HEYWOOD had arrived at Conington in the afternoon, to find Franz's budget awaiting him. He had arrived in a mood of urbane contentment with himself and the world, and everyone, from Matron and Cook to Millicent the housemaid, was flatteringly delighted to see him. Eleven o'clock of the following morning found him, dazed but resolute, sitting at his table in the large, airy, daylit room in which, since its inspired creation ten years ago, he had interviewed parents, received members of his staff, written his official letters, and done most of the administrative work of the school. It was a room full, at this moment, of the morning sky: sky indeed, from where he sat, was all that he could see through the great windows that occupied nearly half the total wall-space, though by raising his head a few inches he would bring into view the remote horizon, the green hills, and the wide intervening valley of the Severn. He had dreamed of such a room, and with Clare to share his excitement had watched the dream being translated into fact by Bob Gurnett, young Sweet the bricklayer, and the old man they called Johnny Carpenter, with all three of whom he was on easy neighbourly terms. It had for him the quality of a refuge, a tower, a room in the sky. It was a hovering ship, poised in a sea of contemplation; but it was also, and most reassuringly, a workroom, a habit, and a home, a home which, despite its modernistic neglect of cosiness in favour of daylight, was saturated already in human reminiscence. Since his return yesterday he had read Adcombe's narrative, once quickly and breathlessly, and again and again with agonized care. He had spent a weary night pursuing a spectre of truth through a series of feverish, half-waking dreams. He had had much argument

with himself. And here he was, weary but unshaken, battered but undismayed.

'Well, Prescott, what have we this morning?' he said cheerfully, lifting a brass paper-weight from the pile of opened letters on his table. 'The mixture as before?'

'Nothing of outstanding importance, sir,' said Prescott. 'I've already drafted answers to most of them, but I thought you would wish to have a look-see.'

Prescott, with his blend of old-world courtesy and imported slang, was the source of much secret joy to his employer. He had been educated some twenty years ago at an unimpeachable English public school, and on being invalided home from an outpost of empire had been delighted to secure this secretaryship, even in what to him was virtually an island of the moon, so fantastically different was it from what he remembered of school life in the Old Country. He was one of the few members of the staff who habitually addressed the headmaster as 'Sir', and he was still apt to wince a little, and purse his lips, when others neglected that mark of respect. The general laxity might well have made his life at Conington a continuing spiritual martyrdom, but for his practical common sense and his deep personal devotion to Heywood. With his neat grey-suited figure, his premature baldness, his kindly humourless blue eyes looking gravely through gold-rimmed spectacles, Prescott seemed to Heywood the very embodiment of something for which he was conscious of feeling, this morning, a new respect.

'Prescott,' he said suddenly, masking his sincerity with an air of banter, 'I'm bound to tell you that you're one of the most satisfactory people I know. You're always so beautifully yourself. You never vary.'

'Very kind of you to say so, Mr Heywood.'

'I sometimes suspect you,' said Heywood 'of being that mythical figure, the man in the street.'

‘I might well have been in the street, sir, and my wife too, if you hadn’t given me this job.’

Heywood grunted. The remark embarrassed him, and he had half an idea that he had suffered a rebuke. Prescott could not be patronized: he was at once too innocent and too elusive. You could laugh at him, however, and he would laugh too, with the greatest good humour, and without in the least seeing the joke. Through all vicissitudes he remained serenely unselfconscious, and, because it never occurred to him to defend it, his dignity was never for a moment in danger. He could talk intelligently and interestingly, but only within narrow limits; and though, to Heywood, newly emerged from the wild world of Adscombe, his existence this morning was a satisfaction and a comfort, a rock of plain fact in a sea of painful conjecture, so too his limitations, his unresponsiveness, were a disadvantage. Heywood felt that he must talk to someone, or burst. He must talk to someone about Adscombe: not in plain terms of course, but in a cunning generalizing style and without mentioning any names. He must, but he couldn’t: it was out of the question. But what a relief it would have been, to let out, no matter how much disguised, some of the thoughts that had crowded his brain during the long unrestful night! It had been a debate between himself and himself, with a third judicial self presiding; for he had insisted on supplying an advocate for Adscombe as well as for Olive. Adscombe, precariously balanced as he was upon the razor-edge of sanity, had done himself something less than justice in his story, said Adscombe’s advocate. By reading between the lines, gentlemen of the jury, quite another story can be read and quite another case made out. On the evidence there is nothing to show that he had not lived in contented celibacy all his life till Olive’s arrival; and both the principal witnesses, both he and she, agree that for a whole year or more of her service with him as secretary he had taken no emotional interest in her. What

then? Is it not possible that the young woman, ambitious to make a good, a socially distinguished marriage, had set out to 'catch' him by all the feminine arts of which she was undoubtedly mistress; that she had demurely wooed him, appealing first to his natural kindliness, then to his long-dormant sensuality, and taking advantage throughout of his pitiful inexperience? And having triumphantly captured him, did she then, finding Julia so secure in possession, repent of her bargain and wriggle herself out of it, resorting at the last to the cruellest trick in her repertory? Was that the truth? But alas, retorted Heywood, what is truth, where human motives are concerned, but a heartbreaking impossible calculation of fine shades? All these things she might have done, and yet be acquitted, except on that last count, the insinuated slander of Paul Franzy, the suggestion that Richard's 'best friend'—appropriate schoolboyish phrase!—had for years been playing Richard false. Yes, said the accuser, there can be no question but that Olive dealt him his death-wound, even though he did take some years to die of it. That suggestion, made at just that moment, amounted to manslaughter; and if its effect had been calculated it amounted to murder.

At this point the argument collapsed. So far it had been merely academic, a logical exercise. As counsel for the prosecution Heywood had done his best and his worst, and he remained unshaken in his conviction that Olive, whatever else she had done, had not deliberately planned and played that master-stroke. Angry she might well have been, or confused, or maladroit; but not murderously vindictive, and for a very good reason. The good reason, the unanswerable argument for the defence, was Olive herself: not the Olive of Adscombe's narrative, not the Olive of hearsay and conjecture, but Olive as he himself knew her. From his own knowledge of her, a knowledge surer than sense and deeper than reason, he knew her to be innocent of the crime imputed to her. It's true I'm in

love with her, he said; but I 'm not a beglamoured boy; I knew her before I loved her, and the loving is a mode and extension of the knowing. She is not innocent because I love her: I love her because (among a hundred other reasons) she is innocent, because in no conceivable extremity could she be guilty of wanton and deliberate cruelty. Suddenly, as if for his reinforcement, there leapt to his mind the phrase in Adscombe's narrative which of all others most nakedly exposed the man's mania. 'Smiling devilishly'—that alone made Adscombe's story incredible, even though for the sake of argument one conceded the substantial accuracy of the dialogue as he reported it.

'No, there 's not much here, Prescott. We 'd better get on with the class lists. By the way, have you ever seen anyone smile devilishly?'

'I don't think I ever have, sir,' said Prescott. He was no more than mildly surprised by the question. He smiled indulgently. 'Is it a conundrum, Mr Heywood, or are you pulling my leg? One 's read about it, of course,' he added helpfully, 'in the cheaper kind of fiction.'

'How right you are!' said Heywood. 'And what nonsense I 'm talking this morning! Are you a reader of novels, by any chance? Do you happen to know Paul Franzy's stuff?'

'Funny you should hit on him,' said Prescott. 'I think I might almost say he 's one of my favourites.'

'Is he now? That 's very interesting.'

But suppose, said Heywood to himself, suppose that untimely disavowal of Olive's was not in fact true. After all, who said it was? Only Paul Franzy himself, and he was not, if you looked at it squarely, the most disinterested of witnesses. Franzy had a wife and family. Franzy was something of a public figure and enjoyed the esteem of a wide circle. Franzy's novels did not suggest a man incapable of yielding to an inconvenient passion. Franzy, in short, might be lying. But if Franzy was lying, why

lie to him, Heywood? Why re-open the subject at all? Apart from Pointing's anecdote about the billiard-room encounter, which was certainly not conclusive, Franzy had supplied the only evidence on this particular point: both accusation and denial had come through him. And if Franzy was lying, where did his lying stop? The very document itself, purporting to be a copy of Adscombe's letter, might be an impudent invention of Franzy's. On paper nothing was more likely, since fiction was the man's trade. But nothing more unlikely, once you began asking what purpose such an imposture could serve. In fine, the theory was preposterous. Heywood did not seriously question Franzy's good faith, and he was confident that Franzy had never been Olive's lover. But was it so certain that she had not wished him to be, and that he, loyal to old friendship and afraid of complicating his comfortable life, had tacitly ignored her inclinations? Well, suppose it was so, said Heywood, who cares? Perhaps she has a weakness for middle-aged men: so much the better for me.

'Hullo! What's this?'

In a flash Prescott was at his elbow. 'Have I come a cropper somewhere, sir?'

'Why do you say *Dear Sir*, instead of *Dear Mr So and So*?'

'I was proposing to sign that myself,' Prescott explained. 'You'll notice it's one of my *The headmaster asks me to say* letters.'

'So it is. Yes.'

'Moreover, the person's rather impudent, I think you'll find, sir. Friendliness would be thrown away on him.' Prescott's glance travelled over the table. 'There's one letter marked *personal*. I think you've overlooked it.'

Heywood picked up the letter indicated to him, then glanced at Prescott with a gleam of suspicion in his eye.

'I believe you shoved it out of sight on purpose,' he said. 'Business first, eh?'

Deaf to Prescott's blushing disclaimer he examined the superscription. The handwriting was unfamiliar. It was elegant and impulsive, fluent and full of character. It seemed to him a miracle and a sign from heaven, for he guessed it to be from Olive, the first he had ever received from her. My lord (the letter said), The witness O. S.—or should one call her the prisoner?—will present herself for a further dose of cross-examination at your lordship's court at Conington, at half-past four of the clock tomorrow, Wednesday, provided the train runs to time. . . . Heywood's heart sang within him. Tomorrow, Wednesday, was today. She would be here today—'smiling devilishly' he quoted, in a rapture of irony—and he would see her. The boys were not expected till tomorrow at earliest: the term proper would not begin till the day after. But Olive was coming today. That was rash of her, in view of the high probability of Julia's accompanying Stuart on his return journey, but not so rash as it would have been to travel on the day of the general influx and risk an embarrassing encounter on Paddington platform. Luckily the guest-room which Olive would occupy was equally remote from the headmaster's house, where Julia no doubt would call, and from the junior dormitory where Julia would probably bid Stuart good-bye. Moreover he had hopes of persuading her to take herself off during the period of danger, to Tewkesbury or some other place of concealment. The simple cunning of this plan gave him a childish pleasure. The decision once taken, his scruples about deceiving Miss Adcombe had vanished like smoke. And now, with Olive's letter in his hand, his one immediate thought was to make a good job of the deception.

'A Mrs Kent is coming today,' he told Prescott. 'You might ask them to have one of the Bridge House guest-rooms got ready, will you?'

'Certainly, sir. Will she be staying one night, or more?'

'Two, I fancy. Possibly even three.'

Meeting Prescott's guileless look Heywood smiled joyously and came within an ace of telling him everything. Sunlight ran in his veins. He was excited and expectant and tormented with anxiety. He looked at his watch: it was nearly lunchtime. Five hours to run, but they would not run: they would crawl, they would dawdle, they would stand still. Three hundred minutes reluctantly ticking away. How he was to get through the afternoon was beyond conceiving . . .

At four o'clock he went into his garden and settled himself in a deck-chair, sternly resolved not to look at his watch again.

XXIV

It was here, in this garden, that the whole disturbance had started, on a boisterous afternoon not six months ago. Today the trees were still, the air autumnal, the season mellow and benign; and between then and now, he reflected, he had lived through not one lifetime only but many. He was a new man yet the same, both older and younger than then, hearing in memory the echoes of battles in which he had had no part and feeling the ache of wounds he had never received. Because it had become intimately involved in another's, for good or ill, his life would never be the same again. It might be better or worse, fuller or emptier: it could never be the same. At the very next turn of the road, round this blind corner in time, something utterly and enticingly new awaited him, whether joy or desolation he hardly dared ask himself. Happiness he did not demand or expect, whatever his hurrying heart might say to the contrary. Happiness is a moment's bloom, he said. It comes and goes in a flash. It can't be tethered. And it is not happiness I want: I want Olive.

Today it was not, as last time, a child in pigtails who announced her. 'A Mrs Kent, sir, to see you,' said Millicent, at the lawn's edge.

Carefully calm, Heywood got out of his chair. 'Mrs Kent? Ah yes. Ask her to come out here, Millicent.'

'And will you be wanting tea brought, sir? It's nice and warm, isn't it, for the time of the year?'

'Good idea,' he agreed, smiling with infinite benevolence.

Millicent, smiling in return, went off to fetch the visitor. Heywood stood waiting, hardly believing it. But it was true, for now at last he saw her emerge from the house and come towards him. She was coming, here and now.

Adscombe, Franzy, Julia, Mardley, even Stuart for whom the long unravelling had been begun, all were dissolved in a mist of oblivion. Olive only was real. Here and now she was coming, armed with power, bringing fulfilment or famine. The wonder of it, and the terror, made him tremble.

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